Pastoral Scanlines

Selected Works '20 - '25

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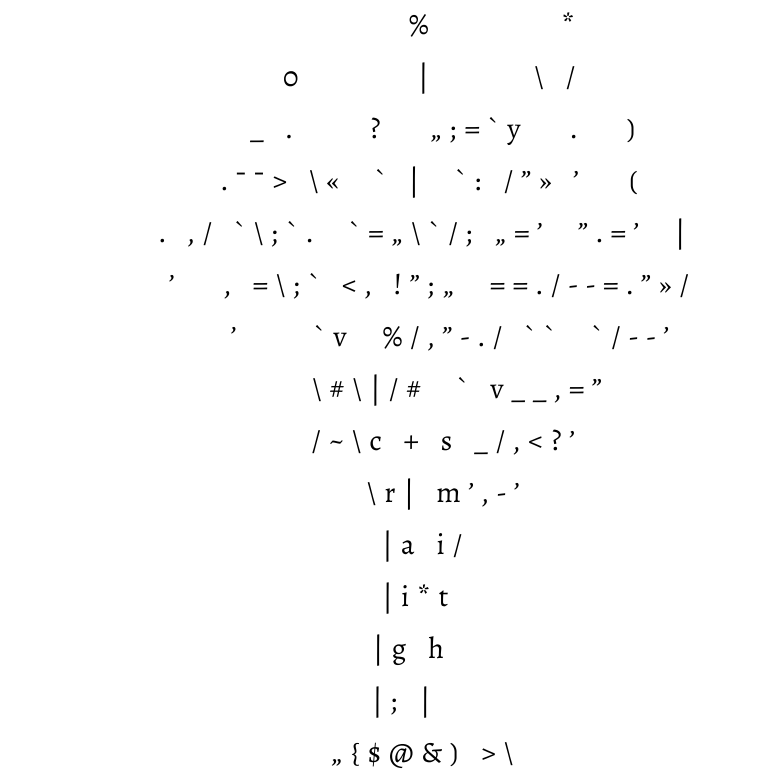


Then he grew calmer, and the vessel was carried on and reached Newcastle.
- *Patrick White, Voss*

Contents

1 - Preface

13 - Untitled

17 - Autoincorrect

27 - Saltando

35 - Garden Monologue #2

57 - Ambient 1-4

79 - Peoplehood

101 - Gnomon

105 - Fellow Disjecta, Oh Sunny Danger Time

159 - She Believes Antique Logs Take Flight

161 - Leaving / Leading

173 - Garden Monologue #1

185 - The Wind Bucket

187 - A Billiard Table with Five Balls and Twelve Cues

197 - Carnival

201 - Postseasonal

211 - Aborealish

213 - Prompt

227 - Selector

237 - Obfuscation

255 - Pugil

275 - Nature as Landscape
(from 'Antinomicity')

283 - Based On Your Viewing History

287 - His Is A Quiet Carriage

293 - Bundlebloom

303 - Protection: PS Part 1

317 - Sandsync: PS Part II

329 - The Body Of This Story

333 - Hesse

347 - To Weave, To Fabricate

349 - Sovereignty is an Artificial Soul

375 - A Parallax of Tensor Sharding

395 - Beyond Correct and Incorrect Nature

409 - Scenes (from 'A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight')

439 - Just Talking About Pies

441 - Not Dry

465 - Ember Rim

Preface:
Landscape Within Landscape

Thought has a feeling. It carves out negative space from the dust of consciousness that blooms on the stage behind our eyes. It manifests as a shape that expands, contorts and becomes landscape within our internal empire. To think is to be a cartographer of a mental geography that mirrors the panorama of daylit trajectories we navigate across our waking lives.

This is thought as both topography and topology. There is no more accurate phenomenology of the experience of thinking for me than recognising the feeling of spherical rubber, made from soft light, fold into a torus in the middle of my head, stretching out and doubling back on itself as a cross surface that becomes a city on one side and a pastoral sheet of memories that rapidly reel back in and become thoughts the size of five-cent coins, and then a bus, and then a hill that becomes a declivity into darkness as my thinking stops and some background buffering gives time for the shape to reform, a node facing due north in the medically designated centre of my mind.

As a child I can remember the feeling of sitting in my bedroom, closing my eyes and having thoughts - I used to think about walking along telegraph wires during sunset - that had a physical resonance to them. The thoughts felt like the inside of my head was a balloon expanding and filling up the room. Then, the thought would shift - a memory would enter, or I would plan a game - and the feeling of thought would become like a plate in some midground space between my nose and my shoulders.

In my early thirties, I would tell my wife, 'I need to start the day by walking through the city, to feel my thoughts fill the streets', which I would suggest is a similar sensation for anybody who feels cramped up in their house and needs to get outside to see the sky, or for those who live near the ocean and are able to stand in front of it and feel a sense of expansive potential. The link between physical landscapes and thought is as old as poetry - likely, the birth of poetry - as ideas were linked with clouds (now, more than ever, since this is where our digital brains live), stories with rivers, accomplishments and challenges with mountains, freedom with flight (above cities, above fields).

The use of metaphor to reflect the subjective human experience against the curtain of nature's stage is not, to my mind, a curious path that our linguistics developed. I'd suggest it is the very material of thought, this sublimation of mind

and matter, one into the other, subject as object, that gives form to consciousness: this is the feeling of thought, an internal architecture of meaning, of light, that occupies a geography in our heads reflective of the shapes, colours and textures we see around us. It is a synaesthetic sensation in so far as it mirrors the forms we are capable of feeling.

When we think about thinking, we often focus on content rather than form. But what if the shape of thought - its volume, texture, spatial dimensions - is just as present as what we're thinking about? What if a thought about mathematics isn't just thematically different from a thought about love but structurally and ontologically distinct? While I am on a walk and think about a friend's face, I have a rubber battery shape in my mind that flattens out slowly like a petal becoming warm. Then, it becomes a wide tent structure at the same instant I conjure their voice and remember a funny joke they told as a teenager. I do not see the tent; I feel it in my mind. It feels like the relief of a tent, the physical echo of a shape within the dark mesh space of no vision (closed eyes).

Philosopher David Pitt published a book last year called The Quality of Thought. In it, he makes a case for the phenomenology of thought in a way that seems true to me - thought has a feeling; it is not just a frictionless stream of symbols

and language and semi-transparent images that glide on without a broader, describable experiential quality. There is a viscerality to thought that gives flesh to idealism.

Friedrich Nietzsche described thoughts' impact on him, within him, as a train passing by and rattling the windows of his interior. Thoughts were always physical for Nietzsche - 'I am affected by my thoughts as others are by their passions... a thought, even a possibility, can shatter me; my courage arises in the freshness of my thought; my vitality pours into me with my blood; even my muscles celebrate a feast'.

When Australian author Gerald Murnane reads Thomas Hardy, he reads the description Hardy has penned of a hill. Then, he wonders what lies behind that hill - not in an imagined sense, of some fanciful daydream of a fictional township or a field shadowed by cloud cover that might exist behind the hill in Hardy's story, but rather *where* is that hill within the mental geography of Murnane's subjectivity, and *where* does it exist in relation to the other hills Murnane has read or thought about: this is memory not as chronology but as space.

In a letter Murnane wrote me last year, he said 'what we call time is our confused perception of place after place'. When I think about what lies behind Hardy's hill, I feel my thoughts hollow out a riverbank in some coordinate some ten or twenty

kilometres behind a field W G Sebald once described a manor house occupying. I can travel from one to the next, or rather, there is a felt mental shape that carries the distance.

The Glass Bead Game by Hermann Hesse describes a competitive academic sport played between two people who face each other and conjure analogies. One player will bring up a phrase of music, and the other will find a relationship between the shape of the passage - a geometric pathway of counterpoint fifths in a Toccata by Bach - with the antithetical steps between historical periods exemplifying a theory of Hegel's. A harmonious connection is made and is witnessed by the audience physically - the glass beads are tokens that represent the shape of thoughts; they illuminate the symbolic connections and the aesthetic feelings rendered. The act of thinking is explicitly experienced, and its beauty and complexity are what preserve human culture.

I've never seen the cognitive computer scientist Douglas Hofstadter reference Hermann Hesse, but it feels to me that Hofstadter's central linguistic tenet - that all thoughts are analogies, that they can only exist as analogy, that the core property of any idea, any mental state, is one of analogy, of relationship, of mirroring - is a reasoned explication of Hesse's game. So too of Murnane's notion of 'place after place' - or, rather,

'this place and its relationship with this other place'. Mental landscape as an analogy of our sense of the external world, one shaping the other. Behind Hardy's hill is an analogy of a rise once traversed as a young one holding the hand of a parent during some infinite afternoon not in the past, but of a place.

If a feeling of thinking is a geography of geometries shaping and reshaping inside our head, then the landscapes manifested are not a sign of intellectual capacity. Unlike other models of thought or intelligence, my approximation here is that a mental landscape of the interior would be experienced in an equal quality of range and shape across a variety of minds in the true sense of neurodiversity. A child would not experience a diminished plane of small thinking - their landscape would be as rich and bountiful as any adult who values the breadth and depth of their capacity to think. An individual who has sustained a traumatic brain injury would not furnish a topography with less peaks and valleys than a university professor lecturing on James Joyce, but rather the shapes and motions of their mental map would reach as far into the distance as any other mind, and as intimately curated to local fascinations of a nature that is not measurable on assessments or scales.

From this perspective, I look into the eyes of a baby and see not a mind waiting to grow and

unfurl in a scaffold of academic mastery but a landscape already present with kilometre-wide smiles from parents and loved ones, the shape of the call of baby's name transfiguring the scale of a musical motif first played down a laneway of yesterday and tomorrow, orienting itself to the potentials of a map not growing bigger by the day, or more accurate or populated with a greater density of thoughts, but a map inherently complete, reflecting the fully formed analogy of self.

What is the Kantian interface here, between the external trajectories of the world that our internal geography is mirrored against, and the manner in which the shape of our mental topography influences the attention we pay to the physical world, reconfiguring its orientation based on the movement of our interior? How much does the media landscape around us, the paradigms of the age, the menu of videos and spreadsheets we feed ourselves, impact the geometry we feel in our thoughts? Yes, we are born with an internal landscape of inherent quality, but how is it restructured by external forces into shapes that work for and against the capacity of our thoughts to travel?

After a day of emails, the shapes in my head are not swift and flourishing - they are flat and barely tangible, barely a shadow felt. Put me amongst the morning streets, holding a soft hand

in mine, listening to the roof of the world rub against space and resonate a harmonic spread - now my mind is becoming expansive again. Wide sheets that flap out like a flag, becoming droplets that fractal and hold, a sense of shelves levitating and becoming bird-like. The medium is the message of the topology of the topography.

When inventor Jaron Lanier first experimented with a virtual reality application involving a character walking around a town, there was a glitch whereby the hand of the body of the character grew too big, to the size of a football field. This, for him, was the real dawn of possibility for how technology could reimagine the proprioception of the human form - what is better, a virtual reality that mirrors the physical world, or one that distorts a strategic fragment of it to kick open the doors of perception?

This is the challenge that is visited upon us by artificial intelligence, too: how will interacting with a mirror, an analogy, of our human cognition, expand or contract our mental landscape? Having AI write poetry for us through the flat reduction of glass we slink our heads towards in the artificial light of some anonymous mid-morning is not going to fuel new geometries behind our eyes, but rather it'll cement our reductions. However, if the posture of our dialogue with ambient computing can spin an interaction with AI into new opportunities for executive functioning, new

creative trajectories not previously considered, then the map will continue to stay true to the inherent malleability of neurodiversity we came packaged with.

At the end of the day, I look forward to reclining on my bed, closing my eyes and choosing from a playlist of thoughts to sequence through. No visual stimulation, no auditory accompaniment other than the ambience of the world. I have a couple of thought playlists written out on a pad that I think through - here is one of them:

1. Walking through a multistory carpark with my wife some decade ago, looking over the city of Newcastle, the spires of the cathedral, the flat rooftops with party lights strung across clotheslines.

2. Eating at a table somewhere in holiday Queensland, at seven years of age, at what may have been Grundy's Entertainment Centre, hearing music and seeing a digital video loop for a television production company against a black starfield.

3. Looking out the ice-laced windows of a hotel room in the early morning, during the middle of winter, five years ago, as a train carrying logs made its way through a weave of chimney smoke through a town in Tasmania.

4. Eating Spanish food some time ago with a mate down on the Central Coast, thinking about the topics we covered that night, how I wrote them down later that evening and into the early morning to fashion some prose.

5. As a teenager, sitting in my bedroom with fifty tabs open on an internet browser, after having downloaded a Bomberman game emulation from a Warez site, as two friends arrive on their bikes to catch up and see what's happening.

6. Recently, climbing the rocky ridgeline of beachscape and shale from Bar Beach to the Bogey Hole, swimming partway there, reclining on a rock near where a cormorant had settled, becoming one with the sun and stone.

Six is enough - that can take a good hour to strobe through. The written playlist next to my bed is much simpler: Carpark with T, Grundy's, Winter Train, Los Dos Hombres, Bomberman, Beach. That is enough to trigger the sequence of thoughts that I visualise and think through, but the emphasis is less on the internal cinema of my mind - this is critically important - and much more, overwhelmingly more, on the feel of the

thoughts as I bring the memories to mind. These are the shapes that form, the feeling of some internal movement of shadow, lightly pressed, of a gradient of tone that stretches sideways, becomes a circle, a balloon, a head within a head, an analogy of a place.

There is an ethical imperative here, I'm sure of it - for me, I want to preserve this feeling of thought, this attention and awareness of a quality of thought that may be quite different to yours, or it may resonate, or signal some other synaesthetic token of internal cognition, the composition of your own Glass Bead Game. Thought has forever been the most invisible part of our ontology, and now that we occupy a world of images and an abundance of language that can make our own linguistics feel minor beneath the acres of data storage units filling up every second, I am driven to once again turn inward, to look beneath the broadcast of information cast along telegraph lines and motorways into the cartography of avenues hewn from the centre of the mind outward, the irreplaceable shapes, the pressure applied to a gap that has travelled with you all this way. Spherical rubber, soft light, place after place after place.

Untitled

Numbers stations cast windborne over dry yellow fields to our hamlet, some thousand even footfalls at the grill where I meet Pleur while bovine tracking - she waves and asks if I know how to till by hand, yes and then it is lemonade at the invisible estate on the hill and dot matrix wheat joysticks and a history of sunburn and some handful of foggily sequenced politics.

I only meet Leif some weeks later.

And then Varva.

Pleur had botany genus back to the Rum Rebellion, allowing me to identify plant life-history data in the fire regime of the local woodlands. Everything was copper glazed, mushroom bounced.

At first it was rows, then columns. Seeding the dust with batteries, what Pleur refers to as keys, she transfers money to cover my time.

The house is tall as her mouth is wide, half the distance of age cast shadows from ripples on the pond where she and Varva float topless in a terracotta rowboat and absorb everything from the Kármán line down to their paramourted ease.

When eventually I meet Leif he does not meet me. He sits on a bench facing mine beneath a lattice canopy and talks only to Pleur about the gaps around the crops. Pleur responds only with reference to Varva who I have not seen yet but who Leif seems to make manifest by drawing an outline of her with his finger in the hot air as he searches for the right word, settling on none.

There are times I walk away when Leif appears, as my job is in the fields and not beneath the canopy, and when I look back I see Pleur gazing at my position while Leif remotely shapes his lips into a broadcast pattern of wanton cardiac elegy.

It is Varva who Leif dissuades notification when he eventually does address me, asking about my family, how long in the valley, before and or after the rapture, generations where he has seen only minor days.

The appleshine afternoon when Varva swiftly footfalls between barn and house before us and is stopped by Leif out of, at the time, seemingly unfounded obligation, he shares with me her name and asks she not do mathematics in my presence, although not in those words.

What he does say, I have it written down exactly, is that Varva should speak Australian.

Autoincorrect

I

Let's go, she said, on a date
where we won't contribute
to a large language model of data.
Well, how could I refuse.

She pushed a graphite etched note
across the table and asked
that I wait to unfold it until I am within
the confines of the corrugated iron toolshed
in the back of my garden, she confirmed
via satellite photograph that it is a safe space
in terms of drones being unable to read
through the roofing panels.

We've known each other five months.
She's a computer scientist and I'm not.
We met at a talk on robotic bees
newly built to not so much teach
but rather encourage real bees
to pollinate more efficiently.

II

Her work and the way she lives
is focused on keeping chat bots
in a state of perpetual hallucination.

Here is an example: you ask
the computer what year the
Sydney Harbour Bridge was last rotated
in accordance with industrial protocols
that require the span be turned twice
each decade, and the computer will say
March 2021. It can't admit ignorance
so it hallucinates a logic wrought reality.

III

No surveillance, that's one of
the rules for our date. No cameras
on poles (black plums, skin rubbed
sheer where the eye peers through)
and speaking of fruit no groceries
either, those sensors that track your
gaze across the shelves – not good.

Phones will be left at home and we'll
use cash only and we should wait
until its overcast so clouds blanket our
footfalls. She says we should cross
the road at random intervals, go from
one side of the street to the other
so our behaviours aren't predictable.

IV

If the scraping of our personal data
whilst we are holding hands or similar
is unavoidable, as it so often is, she
encourages obfuscation.

She learned this from a research paper,
you actively volunteer meaningless
strings of junk information en masse so
the receiving software learns nothing.

She said I could just talk as I normally do
and that should be fine, but she might
chat like the wings of a moth, camouflage
her words with layers of banality, like
what happens to the family name Smith if
you try to locate them in a phone book.

V

Ethically I don't know if I should describe
what she is wearing lest a portrait emerges
of her aesthetic references and even brand
names that could build an image catalogue

that profiles her essence.

Perhaps I could describe all that she is not
wearing on our date (pleather, lemonade felt)
so enough negative space remains, a relief
of her presence (withdraw fish bowl earrings)

to see who is left behind.

VI

You might think this level of care
should apply to this poem – why go
to so much trouble to enjoy a date
completely off the record, a meeting
palimpsest scored blank, only to
then map out the architecture of the
whole endeavour.

To which I would respond that, while
I appreciate the compliment, to
think it is within my capacity to truly
know what is happening around
me at any given time, and to accurately
take note of this – it's not the case.

This is really what we don't want computers to learn:
how to not know, how to be eternally uncertain, how
to be full of ontological gaps. That's the secret sauce.

VII

She likes it when I hum copyright free
melodies (I don't tell her they borrow
substantially from Metallica and Bjork,
I'm just waiting for the right moment)

and she hates the idea that a computer would
ever be able to do the same, which they can,
she knows this, she attended a concert of bee
music orchestrated by algorithm, a thousand
mechanical wings fluttering in tuned resonance
(this night changed her, she didn't even mean
to go, she was looking for a Beethoven playlist
and got so far as typing 'Bee' and autocorrect
predicted: well, if you like bees, you'll love this).

VIII

I guide her head beneath a metal crossbeam
hanging between loose wires and an empty
elevator shaft. It is midday in the holoscene.

This carpark was in a state of redevelopment
but then it stopped. A vegetable garden on
Level 6 used to be cared for by an education
centre on the ground floor, but they're gone.

Nobody saw us enter. We are echo's ghosts.

I don't worry so much about chat bots writing
poems like this one, or that they'll improve
the form, because we got here first. Like this
little golden patch of clean light we sit in to
share an orange, and smile, and kiss –

Whatever follows, remember we got here first.

Saltando

Bare footfalls press alternating stamps into weightless runs of sand. Lightsole crumbles turn shale as the view bends east, arcing out of civilisation's reach where broad stone platforms honeycomb a thousand liquid mirrors, each a garden of crab scramble and urchin pocket beneath hollowed lean of (world towering on world, soaring) rockfaced ternary lines - a coal stave at intervals root, third and fifth, each metre ten vertical centuries of accreted particles, reverse disintegration blooming dark scanlines against Leif's view. He blinks ocean spray and sees again what he saw of her not ten minutes ago, startled by the ease of her familiarity.

She remembered him, somehow, from last week, in the dark: the fanning of her dress like an umbrella, like the mosaic petals of a night-blooming datura (Angel's Trumpet) as she revolutioned to a raw drum and bass loop left on repeat on the unattended decks at the street fair, and then so unlike him - he thinks about this while ambling up a rise of pebbles that swell like a buried heartbeat into boulderish slabs - fingers reaching towards the keys of a 1977 Rhodes MK1 stage piano, he couldn't help it, jamming out a syncopated paradiddle of double octaves and borrowed

melodic hooks that she smiled at, at him, teeth and gums, until a crowd gathered and he got shy.

Foam spray pearled and scattered on Leif's shins, a dusting of cold, shattered sea lace, a quick outbreath of ocean piped up between rock declivities, as he plays out the muscle memory of his fingers retreating from the keys, again he reaches into the air and sees them subtract. Katita, she introduced herself after, told him how wonderful his playing was, with the same smile she had just now on the beach, she waved him out of his thoughts (twisting the water free from her hair). Leif recognised her and could tell with only the faintest peripheral gaze, with his eyes locked into hers, that she was wearing only bikini bottoms.

A cormorant against the sun, light-drinking pinions the colour of silence, basks on a shelf out of Leif's reach. Water drops from here to the foot of a cave beneath the overhang, but what could be above, behind the lip of the bird's perch - a stone bowl penthouse where coralyn salties and naiads bathe while practising their harmonies (their Hanon scales), a volcanic mouth sealed with tank traps from the breakwater beneath the fort, a naturally formed ocarina that blows and resonates a choral hum woven with tones of every available human who chooses not to speak out of reverence for an anticipated soundtrack of grace to accompany a slideshow of limitless war, a simple lookout, a stage.

Leif wasn't sure if he sensed any embarrassment from Katita in her state of undress or whether it was all on his side, his standard self-consciousness pouring forth, for she surely held her composure well, with a measured pride even. He only took his eyes from hers to look out at the sea and then directly back to the pools beneath her brows. It's okay, she smiled, relax, you can look, and he didn't want to be rude, so he looked down and then back up and turned beet red, goofy grin. Katita's friend called out from a picnic towel encampment, they were meeting some guys at the baths soon, would Leif would like to join, ah maybe later, he jumbles words (and half bows?) and keeps on, alone.

Necklacing mantle escarpment takes him around the bluff, although as he elevates so do the waves. Sandy platforms on this raised level are another beach above the first. When Leif's Symphony Number Zero was performed in his early thirties, a door opened onto a hallway of infinities. Ten years on, working on his Fifth, the infinite is a dwindling expanse that only finds pause when he a) falls in partial love with somnambulant women, b) hal-lucinates musical revelation, c) forgets he is a man on the earth. Come sun, peer through overlapping projector slides of memory, embolden his skin. Leif loses his shirt - it rises like a kite untethered (a flag of convenience).

Handel's Water Music and a panpipe

version of Annie's Song by John Denver are cornerstone musical memories from Leif's youth (both in D Major) - the former its technical elegance, starbright still after centuries of replay; the latter how the sounds filled him, all of not yet out of primary school, with solitudinal pining for inexact love. Recollection of a double date a decade later - car licence ink still wet from the registration bureau, he and a mate, both wearing black, standing in a service station backlot with two beautiful girls, both wearing white, like pieces on a chessboard, rules of geometry restricting movement. The cormorant drags a shadow out to sea.

The tideglass ocean veils defragmented shimmer, white moving pixels on crests, cove drawn now as Leif mounts a quartz dune that fans up and against the cliff, a vertical beach that disorients his footing. Wind shuffles the wall of sand into ambient variations of Katita playing out imagined domestic postures - watering lamb's ear, pivoting to a caravan, nestling the zeitgeist. His feet hold up well as he forms a suspension bridge between grain and crag, although not his shorts which tear on a sawtooth rail from the old coal line. He leaves them behind, sure that nobody will meet him out here what with sea levels rising, besides he can fashion a loincloth from coastal rosemary (*Westringia fruticosa*) if the end of history isn't done yet.

Against the upright beach is a boulder the size of a train carriage, levitated here by ancient communal forces, men of a certain generation, that presents Leif with a significant disadvantage to progress: it must be ascended, which he tries, fingers in divets, soles convexed, blue eyes warbling now as his nerve loosens. Oh man, he's frozen. Perhaps to look down, sharp rockfall and deep ocean, good, that makes things worse. Leif thinks about the canon of Western sound, Baroque to Romantic, to regain composure. Why this trajectory (sideways music) - in school, he liked Beethoven instead of Metallica, as if making the better choice, but why not something beyond this narrative, to make Ludwig the dud choice, something that surpasses the best of all possible worlds.

This is where Leif falls (Da Capo al Fine). The sound his naked body makes is recognisable as both single-toned, a crystalline plop, and multidimensional, all possible variations of sound roaring into a cavalcade of reasons he walked away from Katita after she asked him to swim. He'd rather transmute the memory into music, that's how he's always done things - a song is a landscape with all the people removed, a blueprint for how to fashion a kiss in a state of suspended animation, beyond the mess of real-time: look at the way Katita embraces him now, beneath wave collapse and signal fade, heart sonar, her body a mass of

bubbles. It's okay, she smiles, relax, you can look, and he closes his eyes as light trembles to a perfect pitch.

Garden Monologue #2:
Summer Endzone

The heat is in honest service to
light, in dedication to afternoon
from high vantage in the garden
lectured to with blades by Leif's
parents

thirty years ago, he takes solace
that children remember nothing
of being pre-verbal, nothing too
of being pre-determined, press
clippings

kneaded into blood and or bone
for the orchids, the rose garden
still where it was, the roots have
not plucked into little green feet
traipsing

the lawn where the city organist,
Leif's teacher, resides on the hill
(re: 1880 Darwin, "The Power of
Movement in Plants"). Katita has
the radio on.

The heat dwells in waves
that hold their bodies significantly.
Time is rendered ambulate
in praise of last days,
suspended

heat that broadcasts its heat
as summer becomes entropic.

Leif likes the feeling of dying sun
against his house sitting,
Katita toward the information
of her skin, brown broadsheets
that wave as she rotates,
her opinion pages now knee
pressed into blood and or bone

(when she moves the reportage
follows, a quarter million
trees per annual publication
in the old world, add residuals
for each solar rotation of
pastoral crypto turbine text
generation, lenticular declivities

of her creases in motion, zinc
hand prints patted and
dragged in waves across
her back, shoulders, knees
and doze, re: 1880 Darwin
and so on re: somnambulate
and so on). She has the radio on.

While Katita naps, Leif relapses
into reverie about recreating
a documentary he has never seen

(only thirty second snippets
on the national film and sound
archive website, 'Bastards
from the Bush' with Les Murray

and Bob Ellis, school mates
visiting locations of formative
significance) but would like
to reenact in his own way, he
would be Les and his mate
would be Bob, they'd go back
to Warners Bay High School,
to the strip of fast food haunts

in Belmont, to invented sites
where they'll perform gestures
of realism, dress in costumes
of meaning, of neosimulacrum.

While Katita rouses, Leif lapses
out of fictional autobiography
and becomes landscape again.

On the radio
the voice says everybody wants
to think they're the end of history.
The voice says there is a reason
the apocalypse beckons a party.
Otherwise, when would you know
it's time to pop the champagne?

On the radio
the voice says humanity is void
of meaning but not of ideology.
The voice says our consciousness
requires stories like lungs need air.
Necessary fictions - they do not
speak of the real, only the gap.

On the radio
the voice starts to talk about what
it is to be Australian. Katita listens.

To be Australian
is to play pinball
in a coastal leisure centre
in view of the beach
and its silhouettes,
its late century ocean sparkle
of Morse code diamonds

threaded into the ten
J. M. W. Turner paintings
every man in his forties needs to see,

raised on the novels of Hermann Hesse
between wars, on the affirmations
of Nietzsche on what it is to be Australian,
the Down Under Over Man,
the Foster Tuncurry scene
with New Journalists
sleeping on the sand, where ninety-two
in the shade is exactly thirty-three to the
decimal with an endless repetition
of threes to the centigrade,

apologies to the International Committee
for Weights and Measures,
apologies to Anders Celsius,
nineteen forty-eight in the shade, the same
day Columbia Records introduced the very

same ratio, a record
that spins at thirty-three
and one-third revolutions per minute,

eighteenth June, when another revolution
spun out, the Malayan Emergency
and how to be an Australian
Avro Lincoln bomber is to drop
two hundred and thirty-kilo affirmations,

you think of this as an Australian when you
mosey through Murrurindi on foot,
along the wobble of the suspension bridge,
the two-story garden shed
with so many missing panes
the size of LP album covers, rattled out
perhaps by divine wind,
the neighbouring yard housing
so many reused glass bottles
filled with dirt brown water and offcuts of
native Australian labour,

of a capacity to recite the lines
of early Australian poets like Alby Pope,
Wilko Ernie Henley, Frostey the Noman,
Agro's Cartoon Connection,
Hey Hey it's Alfie Tennyson
writing a stirring evocation
of the first media war,

of Churchill in the West Wing as
Australia's first war president, of
one Theirs not to make reply,
two Theirs not to reason why,
three Theirs but to do and die, with an
endless repetition of threes,
thesis antithesis synthesis
(although not necessarily in that order),

it was easier to make a living when you
were writing, as an Australian, for entry

into the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations,
an accessibility of meaning, a still-living god,
a child of eight and an octogenarian both
able to enjoy the recitation of verse, those
songs everybody knows so well rolled out
on the pianola in nursing homes, show tunes

from nineteen thirties Australian riverboat
space operas - On The Sunny Side Of The
Street, Over The Rainbow, As Time Goes By,
Beautiful Dreamer, Julia Jacklin covering
Someday by The Strokes, Holly Throsby
covering Berlin Chair by You Am I, Slowed
Reverb Test Drive by Joji, anything live on
KEXP, Samurai Pizza Cats Episode One,

Chopin's Opus Twenty Five Number Twelve
performed on the Light Organ,
Marianna Simnett using
machine learning to project
Australian species of light entertainment
onto her face, Corey Feldman
on Howard Stern, Beniamino Gigli
singing Handel's Largo for His Master's Voice
with Herbert Dawson on the Light Organ,

A Message to Young People
by Andrei Tarkovsky
delivered at the demolition of the Newcastle
Council Carpark on the twenty-eighth of May
two thousand and twenty-two at ten past
twelve (just after midday), opposite the
Cathedral, the graves of shipwreck victims

trying to make passage into the harbour,
along the shoreline, you think of
Australian writers such as Joseph Conrad
and Hermann Melville, bunkmates
on the Adolphe they left washed
against the breakwall at Stockton
as if it wasn't their problem, as if
they had nothing to do with the
romancing of water,

when the customs agents
asked John Berger, when he emigrated to
Australia, if he had any criminal convictions,
and he replied, in his best Sherman's March,
that he didn't know
this was still a requirement,

how this is very much not what it is to be an
Australian today, on Jimmy Stewart reading a
touching poem about his dog Beau, yes

this is what it means to be an Australian,
to live in the Tropic of Capricorn,
the Largesse of the South, inventing
the Cochlear implant and WiFi and
permanent crease clothing,

on the first date we might imagine
between Dymphna Cusack (of Black
Lightning, The Sun Is Not Enough,
Come In Spinner with Florence James,
although not necessarily in that order)
and William T Vollmann as depicted by
Ron Howard in Grand Theft Auto
about the life of Australian logician
Kurt Gödel, his pet name for Dymphna,
Leonardo's Bride, she taking carriage

of a research grant into the ecology of
coastal communities, of the myths
presented on the vertical backlit stands
of pinball tables,

her a whimsigoth vision
crossing the floor of the leisure centre in a
crimson corset and permanent crease
starfield skirt, he in his most affordable
Australian smile, not quite

like that on the tarmac
of a prisoner exchange
so much as the curve suggested by
the presence of an inland empire,

how it pulls everything in,
how she pulled him towards her,
allegedly, and said -
'Advance'.

Katita tweaks, she asks Leif, did the voice
on the radio just say 'Advance'

and Leif says remember Johann Müller,
how what we share, the closest thing
to a human universal, is our innate capacity
to get things wrong, and Katita says,

well how do I call in to find out, and
Leif says that pirate radio doesn't have
a talk back line, and Katita says
says who, and then says well I'm going
to find the station, and then she picks
up the radio, still with decent charge
with its three C-size batteries, and walks
the wireless down the hill into the city.

Leif watches her descend into
Summer as he reclines into
an absence already replaced
by a company of interior voices.

Perhaps he should recreate
all of YouTube now that
it is gone, the Internet Archive
gone, no books or CDs left
to refer to, no media other
than memory - blessed day.

From Tyrrell to Newcomen
and then Church and Bolton
Katita is lowered into the
magma phasing heat of the
city, sure the smell of salt
from the sand is in the air
but otherwise it's just tar
and glass and radio sputter.

The signal amplitude grows pregnant
and not between gaps in geometry,
waving voice and not, distortion
from a four-piece cutting in
at the Royal Exchange
as bowed guitars are fed into
a Moog vocoder ring modulating
power chords and the sparking of a
dodgy 1/4" cable that leaks Angel smiles.

There is a voice that might be
a crossed transmission
cutting in on Katita's radio,
the same pirate frequency
or near enough, it says
I just want to make pretty
women laugh forever, it says
miracles shouldn't go on
forever, it says that to be happy
is to forgive oneself for existing
(but not forever, just for a while),
it says meaning is the structure
we impose on the void (but not
etcetera, just for etcetera), it says
that to remain a nihilist into
middle-age is an act of courage
and rebellion that should result
in transmissions of love forever.

This is an ordinary devotion
to the long afternoon of youth,
to the laughter of audiences
of long-dead stand-up comics,
to the mumbling of chatbots
and morning pyjama topologies.

The Summer feels significant.
Katita doesn't know if it's the
holiday vibe, the combination
of Christmas and New Years,
but it's there.

You can feel it all around you.
Mornings are wide balconies
and spaghetti strap leanings,
the breeze means something
real, potential.

Skateboard lunches motivate
absolution in oceans present
and imagined, windows open
and imagined, linguistics shy
to offer more.

Say less, relax like you're dead
with bonus life cheat codes in
the back of a foreign magazine
featuring a centrefold of cyber
pastoralism.

Our local data farms have been
stacked with endless Summers.

The Summer feels significant
when Leif thinks back to high
school and modem sleepovers
when websites were new, new
economics.

A pizza company made a page
where you could order online
in a novel way without paying
first, you waited till the driver
turned up.

Leif and his mates ordered one
or two pizzas as a prank using
the poorly coded web form not
sure it even worked, hit refresh
a few times.

What do you know, the delivery
vans just kept arriving as if in a
parade, streaming internet food
(twelve pizzas I heard?). Finally
they stopped.

The prank target was the host of
a televised morning fitness show.

On the radio
the voice keeps on now about what
it is to be Australian. Katita listens.

To be Australian is
to ignore the bridge load limit,
to ignore both the maximum vehicle
mass and maximum speed, and
when the sign says only one vehicle
at a time on the bridge
you question whether that includes the
cloud of dragonflies bundled
like a voluminous airship, pressing
their domain from a high angle, like that
of a camera phone pressed at a high angle
above the faces of snapdragons and
fibre cloth and five o'clock pansies,
to be captured and then
shared with no one,

to knock off at five o'clock and
park your wife in the car outside The Kent
while you walk in for a beer and then
sometime later walk out to pass her
a glass of lemon squash
through the car window,

for to be Australian is
to appreciate chain reactions,

to direct high volumes of light
at peanut butter to make it glow, and

to be Australian is
to wear Day-Glo to a funeral
during your lunch break, the necessity
of the living, even though
you make everybody in your perimeter
a target now, from a high angle,

you and everyone you confuse with love
are now in the mortal crosshairs, too visible,
for to be Australian is to crave visibility
within the fog of great southern anonymity,
the invisible green and the sense of gold
still on the statue of St Joseph's head
as you light a candle exclusively
for the intent of powering stable
cryptocurrencies, and so say all of us,

during a final call for drinks,
the one who says he will shout
the entire pub a nightcap,
the way grandfathers look
upon this man as one who has
reached the highest estimation,
the better angles of our nature,
and so say all of us.

By echo double and white noise halo
Katita thinks she is getting closer to
the source (and and so so say say all
all of of us us ccacrkzsashhadvance).

Conceptual art students are forming
a ladder of bodies up to the top floor
of Bolton Street Carpark, surfers are
taking their chance at riding it down

in one smooth amplitude, like Ninja
Turtles mid-Cowabunga, part of the
handshake social contracts between
athletic cores and Doc Martin poets

smoking and drinking beers outside
the empty post office near the YMCA
while slow dancing to coal ship horns
and the rub of earth's roof on heaven.

Historians designate this Last Summer.

A pucker lips so soft and rue roll on in
Leif's highlight reel of road trips
with Katita to postage stamp towns
offering Chew Choo Takeaways
that are never open, cafeterias sidled
on brassware antique stores also never open,

antique trees in long grass fields ready to
elevate, paperbark rockets from the old world,
song lines and antinomies of current locales:

Katita looks like a plastic token sliding
across a board game from on high in the
organist's garden, Leif pincers his fingers
as binoculars, avoiding right-wing gestures,
see now as she skips past the ladder but
snags a snake that drags her east
through a laneway with a shower for
residents to wash saltwater off, though
now it is used by late-night lovers
who act so offended when they are
yelled at to stop, but we've brought soap
they say, come on brother, but this
isn't the sixties, not even the nineties,
this is a period without suffix, ahistorical.

Historians designate this Vast Bummer.

A group shot of them and their friends
behind a six-pack of soft white loaf rolls
and a tub of coleslaw, all their smiling
faces, or very nearly smiling, very nearly
all, mirror balls swaying on the beach.
On the beach.
On the beach.

That's where the radio host says they'll
going to avoid speech, handing off
the headphones to Katita,
she found them on the ground floor
of the Returned and Services Leagues club
or very nearly, not quite a radio host, they
are a broken window sash waltzed
by salt currents, flung against a telegraph
key that transmits a capacity to synthesize
the human voice, it like all sound
just a series of binary pulses
converted into pitch due to a time delay
ranging from imperceptibly small gaps
to tens of thousands of years, organ music
like that of the piece being played right now
in Saint Burchadi church in Halberstadt,
the chord changes in the first part of the
composition will occur in forty-six years.

Leif won't be around to hear it.
He can't hear it now. He can't hear
Katita as she decides not to say
anything into the microphone
about what it means to be Australian
because there is no microphone
and she has nothing to say. She just hums.

She hums the melody from We'll Meet Again
by Ross Parker and Hughie Charles, sang,
of course, by Vera Lynn - did you know
it features the first usage of a polyphonic
synthesizer on a music recording, that's
what Leif will one day tell their daughter
as he looks at the water - did you know
that water is a viable data storage medium,
you can fit a terabyte of household data
in a tablespoon if it's part of a solution
containing 12-nanoparticle clusters at a
concentration of three percent. How many
selfies could the ocean hold, how many
large language models and simulations of
the life to come. Leif will meet Katita on
the beach soon where the heat is still and
is still in honest service to light, heat that
broadcasts its heat in collapsing waves.

Ambient 1-4

Act 1

Scene: Interior of an old tennis clubhouse, situated on a hill overlooking the water.

A man and a woman in their forties, in a long-term relationship, are the only occupants in the clubhouse.

The man, A, is standing, holding a container of tennis balls. The woman, B, is sitting at a desk, holding a pencil in front of an empty pad, listening to a weak RADIO transmission fade in and out.

A:
Removes a single tennis ball from the container of balls.
Do you think, if I threw one of these balls down the hill, towards the road, that it could make it all the way down to the water?

B:
Listens carefully to the static of the radio transmission.

RADIO:
A barely distinguishable voice recites a series of numbers.
Fourteen, fifty-three, eighty-nine, seventeen, forty-five, sixty-nine, twenty-nine, sixty-eight, ninety-one, one, thirty-three, forty-nine, seventy-nine, eighty-four, eight, twenty, thirty-nine, sixty-one, ninety-nine, twenty-three.

A:
Hefts the tennis ball, throwing it up and down.
The hill is pretty steep. As long as I threw it at just the right angle so the ball travelled somewhat down the centre of the road, so it doesn't lose traction in the gutter or get stuck behind a can or something, I honestly think it could make it.

B:
Leans in towards the radio, adjusting a dial to try and get clearer reception. She places her pencil on the pad.

RADIO:
A slightly more unintelligible voice recites the following numbers.
Seven, three, nineteen, forty-four, twelve, fifty-five, one, ninety-nine, twenty, thirty-three, eleven, eighteen, sixty-six, four, seventy-three, eighty-eight, two, forty-one, five, zero.

B:
That's the first zero we've heard in weeks.

What's the date today?

A:
Bounces the ball on the ground and catches it.
They have a fair bounce. I genuinely think with the right launch, the right trajectory, the right attitude, this ball could make it all the way to the water. To be baptised. To float beneath the sun and moon, forever, or thereabouts.

B:
I think it's the first. The first of something.

RADIO:
An untelligible drone of static emits from the radio.

B:
Leans in towards the radio, adjusting a dial to try and get clearer reception.

A:
I'm going to throw one out the window and see if it makes it down to the water. Watch this.
The man throws the ball hard. It hits a closed window and bounces back, nearly hitting the radio on the table.

RADIO:
An old song begins to fade in.
It sounds like 'We'll Meet Again' by Vera Lynn.

B:
Sits back and looks at the radio in bemused disbelief.
Just when you think you're onto something.

A:
Here, I'll open the window.
It'll help with the signal.
Walks over to the window and slides it open.

B:
Looks at the open window with concern.
You shouldn't leave it open.

A:
A couple minutes won't hurt, not at this stage.
Here, watch this.
He picks up the tennis ball from earlier and throws it hard out the window. It disappears from view.

RADIO:
The radio transmission begins to whoop, bend and volley through some sort of frequency interference.

B:
Leans in adjusts the dials on the radio.
Close the window.

A:
Leans on the open window, looking out.
You have the road sloping down to the harbour,

and then you have a train station at the bottom, and beyond that you have like a little jetty that the balls could roll straight out on and then - 'plop' - into the drink. It's like a reverse pinball machine where the goal is not to avoid the drain but to actually aim for it. Like, imagine tennis but instead of a net it's the ocean.

B:
Looks incredulously at this man, her life partner.
You mean like ten pin bowling?

RADIO:
The radio fizzles and then pops. It goes silent.

A:
Ten thin foal wings, five unicorns ready to launch, eighty-seven rockets, twenty balls, twenty-four, thirty-three, sixteen, two, fifty-two, bless you, zero.

Act 2

Scene: Interior of a wooden cabin situated in a remote rural setting. A couple, A and B, in their early twenties are cuddling together on a sofa.

A table is nearby with a RADIO broadcasting a bird song. The table is beneath a closed window.

RADIO:
Bird song plays on the radio.

B:
It's beautiful.

A:
Do you think it's singing to another bird?
Is all bird song for another bird, or do they ever just sing for their own pleasure? It seems like it would always be in service of mating, but I really don't know. Either way, it's quite stunning.

B:
Mating. Tell me everything you know and don't know about birds. Tell me everything you do and don't know about birds at the end of history. Tell me in your own bird song.

A:
Okay.

B:
Only don't tell me anything about planes.

A:
I won't.

B:
And please don't go into anything about drones dressed up in artificial feathers of flight.

A:
Of course.

B:
Nor anything about people dressed up in bird costumes as part of pantomime or military spy functionality or superhero live action roleplay.

RADIO:
Bird song continues playing on the radio, but a clipping sound makes it sound like the bird song has just looped and restarted from the beginning.

A:
Did you hear that?

B:
What did it sound like to you?

A:
It sounded like the bird song started again.

B:
Like a loop restarting from the beginning.

A:
I thought it was live.

B:
I still think it is. Maybe it was another bird song coming in from the outside.
Stretches arms and neck to look towards the window above the table.
Can you please open the window and check.

A:
Gets up and moves over to the table.
Tries to open the window but can't get it to budge.

B:
That's okay. Come back here and snuggle.

A:
Crashes back on the couch into Cou's arms.

RADIO:
Bird song continues to play.

B:
If we had a spectrogram -

A:
A what?

B:
A spectrogram, they show what sounds look like. Imagine your voice fogging up a mirror.

A:
Would an artificial bird song look different to a real bird song? Would one be the ghost of a sound and the other the bones?

RADIO:
Bird song continues playing on the radio, but another clipping sound makes it sound like the bird song has just looped and restarted again.

B*:*
Tell me everything you know about love. Tell me everything you know about love at the end of history. Tell me everything you know about tomorrow.

A:
Okay.

B:
Only don't tell me anything about planes.
I don't want to hear that they extend indefinitely.

RADIO:
The bird song clips and cuts to silence.

B:
Can you try the window again, please?

A:
Gets up and moves over to the table.
Tries to open the window. This time it rises.
Cups ear to listen out the window. Shakes head.

Act 3

Scene: Interior of a small room situated in a lake district. A man and a woman in their sixties are the only occupants.

The man, A, is standing with his back to a window, looking down at his feet. The woman, B, sits at a desk and reads from a surveyor's journal.

B:
Thirty-one point four three zero zero three one degrees south. One hundred and fifty-two point nine one nine eight one one degrees east. Elevation two hundred and seventy-three metres.

A:
Mumbles and nods his head.
Shuffles feet.
Mumbles and nods his head again.

B:
Thirty-two point nine two eight three six degrees south. One hundred and fifty-one point one five nine seven two degrees east. Elevation one hundred and ten metres.

A:
Chuckles to himself.
Looks up at the ceiling, shakes his head in disbelief.
Chuckles to himself again.
We saw an angel there once.
Standing in a field. Do you remember.
It was hovering above the ground.

B:
Thirty-two point four zero five six seven five degrees south. One hundred and fifty-two point two zero five four one zero degrees east. Elevation nine metres.

A:
You bought a sort of toast with mince on it from a shop around the corner from there. Seasoned mince. We stood on the diving board of the pool together and you told me you were pregnant.

B:
Wearily shakes her head.
No.

A:
No. It's where you bought peaches. They were warm from the sun. You said your whole childhood smelled like that.

B:
Looks up to the ceiling and then down.
Wearily shakes her head again.
No.

A:
No. We have never been there.

B:
We have never been there.

A:
Mumbles and nods his head.
Shuffles feet.
Mumbles and nods his head again.

B:
Thirty-four point four zero three two two degrees south. One hundred and fifty point eight one five eight six degrees east. Elevation one hundred and twelve metres.

A:
We saw a mural of a boy with his hands in his pockets. No, a pelican. You said it looked like I used to look when I stood with my hands in my pockets. No, not a mural, a painting on the wall of a service station. A novelty gift in a frame. It opened its mouth when you clicked your fingers near a sensor. It made you laugh.

B:
Looks up to the ceiling and then down.
I never knew you as a boy. Nor saw any photos.
Only a graphite sketch produced in the newspaper.

A:
I was the only one left behind.

B:
They were illustrating caricatures for a fair.

A:
I will be that young again one day.

B:
Thirty-two point nine two two three eight nine degrees south. One hundred and fifty-one point seven four three three nine five degrees east. Elevation sixty-four metres.

A:
Mumbles and shakes his head.
Shuffles feet.
You've read that one before.

B:
Nods.

A:
We're back to the beginning.

B:
No. We're back to where we started.

A:
The bedside lamp flickered like Morse code.

Act 4

Scene: Interior of a small, round room with concrete walls, like a wartime radio transmission bunker. A man, A, is on his back, motionless, on a canvas folding cot. A woman, B, sits at a desk and listens to a weak RADIO transmission. They are in their eighties and are the only occupants.

RADIO:
A steady hiss of static emits without perceptible feature.

B:
It sounds like the sea. Not coastal waters. Not shoreline. Not when I was girl accompanying a friend to the seaside, traveling with his family. My mother said, make sure to not go out too far into the water, you can't swim very well. I had already nearly drowned once at a neighbourhood party when I couldn't get my head above the deep end of the pool. Someone jumped in to save me as I was lashing my arm out of the water, I could see the world above me, those bright suburban skies, those adults unwatching, as ripples. Who saved me. My father or some other father.

RADIO:
No alteration in static.

B:
With my friend at the seaside, with his family, we got a paddle boat with large yellow wheels. We drove across the water with his two younger siblings on board. His father said, don't get too far out, but his father was also the sort to encourage human displays of bravado, to champion recklessness as a sign of future economic mastery, like stock brokers performing wild motorbike jumps on a work retreat, so it was difficult to tell whether his father actually cared if we went too far out or not, or even what the father's metric for too far even was, if he even had a metric for that, depending on whether his wife, my friend's step-mother, was watching, and whether if her watching would mean he was more or less cavalier about his appetite for risk, like if he thought showing disregard for his kids, for the biological evidence of his former marriage, would make him seem more or less desirable as a new partner, as a father still holding onto the title, more or less, for better or worse.

RADIO:
No alteration in static.

B:
So we went too far out. Much too far out.

I couldn't swim, we'd already ascertained that. The youngest of my friend's siblings was around four years old. The next eldest was six. We were nine and we were all much too far out. The youngest, the four year old, he started to slip off the edge of the paddle boat, I can still see his little hands trying to get a grip on the wet seat, some texture on the big yellow wheels even, but they turned with him, into the water. My friend and I reached for him, the youngest one, each grabbing a hand and pulling him back onto the boat safely, onto the wet seat where he sat hugging his older brother, the six year old. We looked towards the shore where my friend's father was waving desperately, yelling silently, even across the water his voice didn't carry, we were too far to hear him, but we knew what he was saying. My friend's step-mother looked like she was holding her hands over her mouth, trying to stop something inside of her from coming out.

RADIO:
No alteration in static.

B:
We turned the paddle boat around and made our way back to shore. I can't remember if we were chastised or not, if my friend was chastised or not, if I was chastised or not. It seemed to be at the time that it would have been very impolite if my

friend's father had even considered chastising me, since it was not the done thing to discipline a child who is not your own, at that time, in family networks like the ones we were loosely within. However, it is likely that I should have been chastised, for I was the one who encouraged us to go further out. My friend was not a risk taker, he was much too afraid of his father for that. He didn't want to be rejected by his father any more than he thought he perhaps already had been, since he was not a boy of rogue action like his father seemed to value, was too passive for his father's acclaim for boundary pushers. I was the one my friend's father would have preferred as a chip off the old block, temperamentally speaking, if I was a boy and not a girl, although in this instance it is unclear if he would have been pleased with me for being such a risk taker, for putting his children in a position where death was just around the corner, or beneath the surface so to speak, was mere seconds away for the youngest had we not gripped his little hands in time, or whether this would have been seen as risk taken too far, not a display of overcoming nature, of silencing fear in the face of the sort of rewards that capitalism fills you up with if you stare it down and shout *I* into the heart of its machinery, but the sort of recklessness that is seen as gross and indecent, like staying too long at the roulette table, not knowing when to quit. Although, we had brought

everyone back safely, we went up to the brink and faced off against disaster and calmly returned to the placid lapping of water against shale, that pebbly grit which told me we weren't at home, not pressing our soles into the powdery sand of our local beach, no we had to travel how long to get here, to the broken shells that risked cutting your feet if you stepped on them the wrong way. You know what I should have done. I should have looked my friend's father in the eyes when I stepped back onto shore, onto one of those broken shells, hard, pushing it down beneath the grit, not breaking my gaze from my friend's father's eyes, and I should have said, now I am the father. This is my family now. And I should have taken my friend's step-mother by the hand and said, let's go, towards the station wagon, looking back over my shoulder to my friend, shouting to him, are you coming, bring your brothers, and then I would have turned the key in the ignition and said, who wants to listen to the radio, and they all would have said me, me daddy, put on the station that plays all of our family favourites.

RADIO:
A brief tremor in the static, like a subtraction of frequencies, a blip, a plop, a drop, emerges.

B:
Leans in.
What is that?
It sounds like something falling.
Dropping into the water. Round like a zero.
There it goes again. Plop. And another.

Peoplehood

It is the eleventh of January and the new year is still fresh out of the oven. My daughter is with a friend and my wife is accompanying our son to preschool so I decide to enact an idea I have had for some months - to walk the length of Industrial Drive.

While I was a frequent visitor to Newcastle as a young lad it was only in my twenties that I moved here, near the university. I remember one day driving some friends, who lived in the east end of town, to see my place and I couldn't quite work out how to get from the inner city to the edgelands. I had particular routes in mind but they all seemed inefficient, particularly as evening was setting and GPS and phone maps were not mainstream.

By chance I took a turn down Industrial Drive and it felt as though I had entered a dream state. What was this annex that ignored all residential realities and posited as a pipeline from the tundra outskirts of the city through a starfield of high tower glitter and train line sweep.

This will sound like a joke at best for any locals in the area who recognise the dual carriageway as nothing less than baseline banality, a featureless eight kilometre stretch that serves little more than to connect the thoroughfare to and from Maitland and the Hunter Region with Newcastle harbour. There is no 'dream state' about it, except perhaps within the ghosts of its industrial history, as a necklace that skirted the city within a city that was the Broken Hill Proprietary steelworks which dominated the region between 1911 until its demolition in 1999, employing nearly fifty thousand residents across the century.

The economic impact caused to the nearby suburbs by the polluted output is still apparent. Gentrification is the holy word sprayed on the walls of young coffee shops and pizzerias trying to shake off the smog that foreclosed the neighbourhood and sent families to the other side of the lake. A nearby school I taught in saw that its empty classrooms soon needed to be split in half to fit all the new enrollments in the decade since the steelworks collapsed.

There is no pedestrian access along Industrial Drive. It is for vehicles only, often fuel tankers not permitted to drive through residential streets. While the steelworks are closed it is still home to heavy industry - petrol depots, coal exports and shipping containers at the port, manufacturing.

I meet a council worker mowing the lawn, he stops and asks me if I need help and I explain what I'm doing. He says he wouldn't be here if he wasn't working, a nice day like this, if he were twenty years younger, my age, he'd be at the beach or at the pub. I ask if many people walk along here and he says sure, more than you'd think.

Some years ago I began an online dialogue with a game designer who was seeking small funds to help finish a point and click game set in the Louisiana petrolbelt. To thank me for support he posted printouts of pixel art landscapes from the game. I knew the geography of desolate riverland

set against empty superhighway immediately - this was Industrial Drive, just another version of it, set on the other side of the world.

We talked about our shared fascination with these landscapes. Both of us were repulsed by the way expansive natural settings had been choked by polluted industries and yet we were drawn to them, swooned by telegraph poles standing amid bushland like misplaced crucifixes, like a Friedrich David Caspar painting where the potential of Spinoza's nature-as-god is theologically corrupted by the presence of a tiny stooped human distant against a rock.

My recurring sentiment is that this attraction is one of analogy, that we look for landscapes that mirror the internal topography of our subjectivity. We see a sunset marred on the horizon by plumbs of distant smog and feel, unspoken, a metaphor for the last innocent hours of childhood before economics scheduled our future.

When the designer finished the game he sent me a copy and I was delighted to see my name in the credits. As a young video game enthusiast I never anticipated seeing my name one day scroll down the closing sequence of a title.

There is a side street that turns off a rise in the road, it cordons an overgrown nature reserve that has a little playground and, my favourite part, a water bubbler nestled in an alcove of trees near absolutely nothing. It's a good walk from the playground, it's a good walk from anywhere, and it's everything I hope to find on these excursions.

I imagine a question on a psychological screener: do you seek out symbols of isolation instead of community.

My wife has a friend from her school days that lives around here, mere streets away, with two children of her own now. We see her now and then.

'Bowling Alone', that seminal end-of-90s text by Robert Putnam on the decline of in-person social intercourse, rings true to me, but perhaps primarily so because I embrace the trend. I take solace in the world becoming ever more like an Edward Hopper painting, another set of painted metaphors, even as I rue the rise of corrupting populist forces that rush in to fill the void.

Richard Yates knew it all too well, and realising that 'The Easter Parade' will be fifty years old soon is a sobering thought. Were the seventies really half a century ago. In the nineties, only three percent of surveyed Americans said they had no close friendships. Today that number adds another ten points to its currency, and the pandemic just

spotlighted the trend ever more starkly. The Australian statistics are pretty much at parity.

There is a bridge here that crosses an access road and a rail line where trains trek coal from the Hunter out to ships at the port that sail to China. I remember seeing smokestacks near Shanghai one evening, behind a field and the basketball courts of a medical rehabilitation hospital, and wondering if the fuel was from some hole back home.

An ex-colleague and I recently published a chapter in an academic textbook on the role of technology, specifically augmented reality, in supporting the soft skills involved in public sociability.

Years ago, during the period you could buy monthly pocket guides on the best websites to visit, a single comic panel was published in the New Yorker that has gone on to become the most reproduced cartoon in the publications history. In the comic scene, a dog is sitting on a chair using a desktop computer, and he turns to a dog looking up from the floor and says, 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog'.

Friendships are now maintained through group messages, rarely through individual contact. Only the most intimate companionships are funneled into solitary text streams. Group chats are, like parties, entirely performative, every message either a setup or a punchline, although

the punchline is enough these days, no setup required, though sometimes, increasingly, there is no punchline either.

Over the rail line Industrial Drive curves towards the barrier bushland and empty mansions of the BHP. There is a steel spring coil manufacturer near the lights.

On the Internet, nobody knows what came before.

One of the differences between virtual reality and augmented reality is that in the augmented version you can still see the offline world around you. A digital overlay is pressed against your field of view similar to what the pilot of a spaceship would see during some futuristic dogfight sequence rendered with neon coordinates and crosshairs.

The gist of the chapter my colleague and I penned is that augmented reality could provide a supportive avenue for those seeking guidance in how to engage socially with others.

Technology has been framed as antithetical to human consciousness since factory cogs began turning on their own, but do you remember Pokemon Go, the way that young people, including the shy, the nervous, a community of introverts, all gathered on the streets to catch pocket monsters with their phones.

There are ways of getting people out onto the streets that don't necessarily lead to the Arab Spring. The new illusion will be standardised.

On the morning of the eighth of June nineteen forty two a Japanese submarine fired thirty four shells at the BHP steelworks. They landed over a broad expanse of Newcastle. Only one of the shells exploded, near my father's boyhood house in the east end near Parnell Place.

There are two memorials positioned in the region some of the shells landed in the BHP zone but neither are in relation to the war. One is comprised of a ring of thin vertical metal rods with spheres atop. They look like burnt matches and represent the men and women who lost their lives through industrial accidents working at the site.

A second memorial, the Muster Point, stands as a four-walled building with no roof, signifying a conclusion to the steelworks operations.

Both used to be accessible, you could just walk off Industrial Drive and push through a bit of bush and scrub and you'd be amongst them, but everything is fenced off now pending redevelopment plans to build something new.

Great mansions also used to stand behind this zone, administration buildings of thirty and forty rooms. Twenty years beyond their utility they still remained in immaculate condition: no graffiti on the walls, no signs of forced entry. Security closely monitored the nearby port and rail lines, so this may have kept them safe. Not so other parts of

the city, Hunter Street Mall comes to mind, decimated, I took a walk with a close friend through there the other week, a mate from boyhood that I try to see once a year. Mostly we talk about the death of god and our favourite comedy routines.

On this occasion he reminded me of something I said once, during our university days, about how I only need two chips from a bag: the first chip to know the sensation, the flavour, the second chip to feel what it's like to relive the experience of the first chip, to receive the gift of repetition, comfort in geometry, and that is enough. Any further chips are hollow mimicries of the critical first two.

He says he thinks about that a great deal these days.

A little up the road there are a set of three neat brick cottages. I don't know when they were built, they have similar architectural properties to turn-of-the-last-century homes a few streets back from the highway. They are unoccupied and would look all but abandoned except for two rows of garden beds between the cottages, each containing an assortment of different plants, a jumbled selection really of vegetables and ground foliage and varieties that could be arranged into sweetheart bouquets.

Signs above the garden beds note that they are managed and monitored by the University of Newcastle, in coordination with local industry funding, to monitor the impact of polluted soil on the health of plants and agriculture. The same soil here is in the gardens of the homes across the road a few streets back from the highway.

There are dozens of garden gnomes spread across the grounds of the cottages, particularly beside the driveway area. They are all spray painted in a universal silver.

It is not always, if ever, easy to see what's coming down the road, so to speak. Industrial Drive only unfolds fifty metres at a time before it curves and turns beyond the range of any current vantage point, and this seems in line with any measured predictions of the future, no matter how much big data tries

to render science from wishful thinking.

We have in recent years seen a lot of collective social action stem from online communities that have found their way into offline physicalities, shouts on the street. Some say that whenever a progressive movement begins online it results in an opposing, reactionary display of old world power that quickly works to subvert the possibility of change.

Others still would say that social movements only succeed, like gains made in civil rights, when individuals are prepared to come together as real world communities and give their lives over to a cause, whether for years or forever.

What, then, is the relationship between the virtualisation of life lived online and the shout on the street.

I have been following the rapid development of visual art generated by machine learning algorithms. At first, a long time ago (say, eighteen months) when the technology was in its infancy you would ask the computer to paint a picture of a face and it would give you a finger painting produced by a toddler in a dark room. Months later the face was more finely rendered, not unlike the quality a talented amateur artist could produce in an hour. Weeks beyond this the resulting computer generated portraits made the works of the Old Masters look poorly realised, and then, in what felt like mere hours later, the images produced by the algorithms made me look in the mirror and feel more uncanny than the most real, most human, faces looking out of the screen.

The other week two images of pastoral landscapes were posted on an artificial intelligence forum. Which one, a question posited, was a real photograph and which was computer generated. The punchline was that both were undetectable fictions, and that they were posted by a bot.

I stop at one of my favourite destinations anywhere, when I come upon them: a wooden bench seat beside a tree. You

find them out the back of service station truck-stops, in the rest areas of public institutions like council buildings and hospitals, near Lions Club waterside parks and boat ramps, and here, on the side of Industrial Drive, within view of some approaching sport fields.

Researchers who study online social communities say that there has been a move in the past two years away from people accessing broad, public, all-access social networks towards smaller, curated, invite-only private servers. The big social networks are thought of as gross public spaces where animosity is fuelled and monetised by agents of chaos and their legions of bots, where elections and pandemics are called into question. But now the smaller servers are being marked as echo chambers where like-minded folk simply reinforce group-think cognitive bias.

History will be written by the victorious code.

During the pandemic, Major League Baseball games were played between two teams in stadiums void of fans. Yet when you watched the games on the television, or listened on the radio, you could hear the ambient roar of the crowd beneath the crack of ball meeting bat, and then an eruption of cheer when the ball arced into the empty stands.

Where did the sounds come from - they

came from a video game version of baseball. Sounds from the game were extracted, seventy five effects and fan reactions, and then triggered at suitable moments through speakers within the stadium. Interviews with the players said they appreciated the audio, that it encouraged them to play their best.

Video game sounds played in empty baseball stadiums, synthesising the presence of teeming thousands. On the radio you wouldn't know, but on the television, what a dissonant spectacle. Like an inverted Camus when he talked about looking through the glass windows of a dance hall full of revelers, what you'd think if you couldn't hear the music.

The end of Industrial Drive meets another main road that heads up into the coalfields. There isn't much to see up here - I can see the neighbourhood I moved into near the university, and if I turn back around to face where I've just walked from I can see an industrial area off to the west, beside the Hunter River.

The estate is rezoned swampland turned warehouse buffet. They call it, you can't make this up, Steel River.

I wonder if that's why the few dozen garden gnomes around the heritage cottages investigating contaminated soil are all spray painted silver. Probably not.

One of the first warehouses I pass is a medical research facility. It's near another research operation, one investigating energy, that I took a class of school children to once. Our guide showed us how when you walked on the floors of the building the vibrations charged

kinetic energy which fuelled the lights. So too the sapling birches outside, wires on their branches charged batteries as they swayed.

Some years ago a mate of mine who works at the university in the biology department showed me a video game called Foldit. The object of the game is to fold protein structures as perfectly as possible. Ten years ago there were a quarter of a million people registered to play Foldit, I don't know what the current stats are.

When I said the object of the game is to fold protein structures, what I should have

more accurately said is that the premise of the game is to record how humans fold protein structures, to note the ways we go about the task, our creative wins and errors, in order to teach algorithms how to get better at doing the same.

A 2019 research article reported that Foldit players were able to solve a set of protein problems more accurately than experts in the field and automated algorithms due to the game mechanics the players were employing. This accuracy will be taught to the computer.

A crowd is not always inherently wrong.

Consciousness is, it would appear, a collective phenomena. It does not exist in isolation - its ontology is birthed through dialogue. Like Wittgenstein's thing about how if a lion could talk we couldn't understand it, your mind is not yours alone. Like an analogy, it only exists as a mirror.

Down by the Hunter River, a half kilometre from the thoroughfare of Industrial Drive, from the stream of vehicular traffic, I'm not walking down the non-pedestrian zone anymore, not flirting with being on the sidelines of the concrete information superhighway or suggesting anything about having one foot in and one foot out of that state of public community. Instead I'm in a subtracted space on the edgelands looking

beyond the boundary, across the river to where some formless geography radiates potential.

There are powerlines that span the gap. They are of the variety that transmit but do not receive, they are not bi-directional; likewise if you gaze for long into the plentitudes of community, the returning gaze cannot meet your eyes.

WARNING
4.6m

Gnomon

There is always a hole in a fence,
eventually, that someone else has made.
Local hoodlums, is that still the word,
anticipated my palliate arrival with pliers,
somewhere to smoke or shoot up or shag,
is that still a word, but I'm thankful all
the same because there is nowhere else
in the city or the neighbourhood, is that
still a thing, to walk my dog today, for
all the good spots are taken and I don't
trust him to be social with other dogs,
the only real trick I've ever taught him.

The fence hole is in an industrial
estate still being established, there is an
unused quarter, is that still a thing, where
I watch my dog run through yellow grass,
or not so much run as bound, is that the
word because it seems like he's doing the
very opposite of being bound, because
giving a dog the opportunity to run free is
a handsome thing but also reminds you of
how this instinct is mostly restricted, but
not today because look at where we are:

northward is nothing but sky,
I don't mean straight above my head,
although that is also nothing, I mean to
the horizon, just some arm of a crane like
a twig from this distance, it pivots in an arc
like the gnomon of a sundial, pointing now
towards the old gun barrel radio station on
the hill that still distributes a signal, low
powered, someone messing around with
pirate frequencies, I know because I hear
directions being read by a man wearing
what sounds like a heavily pilled jumper.

Transmission towers daisy
chained by melancholy strings like
Elgar would have liked seeing bowed,
not heard necessarily, the visual would
have been enough as it is now, seeing
them become small as I back up towards
the fence line, who knew the ground
here would be so wet, is this what it has
come to, seeking out sunken fields in a
zone beyond the reason of townships,
through a hole in a fence (ok I admit it
was me who made the incision, is that

still a thing, admission, admission
into this area, but I jest), somewhere for
my dog to go unfettered, to walk without
neighbours, to see cranes and grass and
power pylons and rusted buildings on
the hill beneath Tuesday dry sunlight,
and while we need to turn back because
we have run out of solid ground, there
will be another day when we will return,
not phased by how messy this sludge
wander was, the nettles from the grass
pinned to us saying 'take me with you'.

Fellow Disjecta, Oh Sunny Danger Time

'His heart, a mud-puddle, sang' -
Dream Song 288, John Berryman

I had been waxing lyrical on nineties nostalgia for what seemed like months to anyone who would care to listen when the Fabio goose incident came up across the dinner table. We laughed about it - about the idea of Fabio, about getting hit in the nose by a goose, the whole millennium closing kitsch of it all - and thought nothing more of it until the next day when I went for a bike ride. Without a word of a lie, I got hit in the nose by a sparrow as I was careening down a hill. It flew from left to right across my vision and drew blood from the bridge.

My son is four and has recently taken to playing a software emulation of a Japanese arcade game from the early nineties. Mega Man, or Rock Man in the original translation, is a robotic boy created by a kindly father figure in a science laboratory, similar in every way to Astro Boy who was, we assume, a nuclear-age update on Pinocchio. I watch the crystalline star-field backgrounds lacquered with parallax velveteen scanlines of indeterminately coloured pixel biomes and see a beautiful and necessary offset to the decimating cannon blasts from my son's right arm.

From my wing-chair here, facing four broad window panes in the sunken bar lounge of The Grand Hotel, looking out to the beach at a storm passing through, I spot a rainbow. It is positioned right where domestic flights begin their descent into the local airfield, so much that it looks like they are flying through a luminous archway. My wife was recently told she has rainbow cataracts. She sees chromatic haloes around all sources of light. I'm colourblind, so I feel this somewhat balances us out.

I remember going to a beach one Summer's morning two decades ago when I was seventeen or eighteen with two girls in my high school advanced history class who invited me for a swim. It felt so uncanny - here I was, an awkward outsider riding the waves beside eight long limbs and two ponytails shaking free beneath infinite salt laden skies. At one stage a green turtle passed us by and it looked large enough for us to all climb aboard. For reasons unknown, out of the three of us I am the only one to have made it alive to forty.

During my university days I joined an arts collective. I must have been walking through Civic Park one evening when I saw a light on upstairs in TPI House and, like a moth, went over to investigate. One week later a slam poet read aloud one of my early pieces of journalism while a bass player accompanied. I was invited to participate in improvised circus shows the group put on and was asked to soundtrack an art performance of a romantic couple who lived in a plastic terrarium in the Watt Space art gallery for a month.

When my daughter, now fourteen (this is the year of fours - my son is four, my daughter fourteen, my wife and I forty) was four, she used to call rainbows '*rain boats*'. I read The Rainbow by D H Lawrence for the first time earlier this year and became interested in the ninety-nine days he spent in Australia during which he wrote his novel Kangaroo. Living in Australia can feel like being in pages of a global newspaper that have been cut due to lack of international interest. You can, on a pleasant day, feel well outside of history.

I recently finished an assignment for ABC National Radio on the decline of service stations in rural areas. The piece was sparked by an interview that William T. Vollmann did on the same program in relation to his recently published second volume of Carbon Ideologies. Some country towns are in a difficult spot due to their reliance on petrol for farm work and also simply traveling for basic services, whilst facing economic conditions, due to population decline and all the rest, that mean many fuel stations are simply unavailable.

The Hopperesque has become the fetishisation of economic decline and subsequent dreams of peace. In Edward Hopper's Gas, his vision is that of a lonely old soul toiling in obscurity. Today, the aesthetic of abandonment is an erotic one, of young people discovering eden on earth the day after modernism collapses. To see a desolate service station is to see a vision of the eternal freedom promised after death. Critically, not your death - this is a vision of capital taking the living world with it, except for you. In an inversion of the Christ tale, the world died so you could live.

Turning forty reminded me of the age I was as a child when my father turned forty and I thought, forty, my dad is old now. For my entire youth my parents had ages that started with three, and now my father had stepped into a new bracket. Now my father is about to turn seventy and I think, seventy, that feels properly old. We share a cultural catalogue, my father and I, when we catch up to walk together, of references to Les Murray talking to Bob Ellis, of Heifetz and his violin and battery run car, of Ruskin on Turner, of Groucho Marx and Terry Thomas and M*A*S*H.

My mother and I took my son to the beach the other month. He had recently taken ill but was feeling up to a trip to the rock pools. The two of them stood in a crater that rhythmically filled with foam wash from the incoming waves. Hearing his glittering laughter and seeing her beam with elation at every jump and dip he took as water filled their declivity was my amor fati. Responses to our condition of nihilism should not be leaden and graven - Chesterton was wrong, Nietzsche delivered perfectly on the value of soap bubbles and butterflies, of guffaw as battle cry.

Earlier this year I attended an alumni media event at the university. I got chatting to a younger chap about a business he had recently started, developing and selling quote unquote smart refrigerator thermometers that were able to remotely monitor and adjust microdegrees of cool for food or medicine for restaurants and pharmacies. He didn't know what to say when I showed him a photo I had taken a week prior at a rubbish dump of old medical refrigeration units with attached forked probes that I presumed were antiquated versions of what he was talking about.

After a significant storm that blew nearly all the most established trees in the region onto their sides, dirt plate of shallow root systems held flat against the horizon like a shield or a modesty curtain protecting the dignity of the fallen wood, my wife and I, for reasons unknown, broke into a warehouse and took photos of her wearing a bird mask and a trench coat. I recall now we sent the photos in to ABC Newcastle for a portrait competition. They phoned me for a radio interview a week later, making light of our transgression I simply said we'd found temporary accommodation for our displaced avian neighbours.

A royal commission into the disability sector has recently concluded. I interviewed some specialists in the field about the published recommendations with particular focus on the suggestion that all segregated schooling and group homes should be closed within the decade. One of them said that we no longer put all the poor children in one school and all the rich in another, so why - and then their expression broke and they apologised for smirking. Another said we have twenty-first century ideals with twentieth century pedagogy and nineteenth century infrastructure and I agreed.

One Summer when I was fifteen or sixteen I managed to download a Japanese platform game originally for the Sega Saturn console to my computer. The game was Bomberman, I had been enchanted by the graphics of the character ever since I saw it in a magazine when I was seven or eight. Two friends from school, who I had been bike riding with every balmy evening of the holidays, popped in and saw all the Warez sites I had open, the fifty internet tabs during a period where an image took thirty minutes to download. Later we learned how to tinker with television remote controls to open anyone's garage door.

Daytime television doesn't exist anymore, it's all streaming or on demand, which is sad because it was such a portal of discovery. I recall so many random episodes of shows from the nineties when I was home from school, either due to poor health or holidays: Northern Exposure, a scene where couples are kissing and passing an olive from one mouth to the next; Married with Children, where the son talks about still having his dignity just before he rips off his Velcro tearaway suit. The thought of all those characters existing in some midday fragments of the past breaks my heart.

Gerald Murnane talks about the mental landscape that the act of reading brings into focus. When Thomas Hardy describes a hill, but not what lies behind it, Murnane considers that the hill resides in his subjectivity positioned in relation to all the other locations he has read and thought about. In this manner, the ontology of behind the hill can be accessed. For me, the panoramas we seek in the exterior world are talismans for the architecture of our interiority. We feel at home in spaces that mirror the topography of our subjectivity. Murnane says there is no such thing as the unconscious, and I agree - there is only landscape.

My son recently spent a week in hospital. I ate a warm meal from the cafeteria every day. We played in the fairy garden. There are no mysteries in life in terms of morality and meaning, it all makes sense. Example: is life fair - no, any given week in a hospital will answer this. It is luck and nothing else. Does life have a purpose - again, no. Just spend an hour at the far end of the corridor in the paediatric ward, near the elevator above the morgue. Grass must grow and children must die - yes, but think about what both of these conditions do to us. Human progress has made my son sick.

One of the illusions of our age is that contact between remote folks is easier than ever before. But here's the thing - I have a school friend I want to get in touch with, his last name is Brown and his first is equally generic, and he doesn't appear in any online searches I've done. His name isn't in the phone book. If only his last name were Spatula or something unique, but he is camouflaged by banality. Until recently I was sure he was living in Sydney, but the other day I ran into another school friend who told me he saw Brown at a wedding and that Brown is living locally, in Newcastle, now, and has been for some time.

It is the third of November today, which is only relevant to note because Finian's Rainbow just came to mind. Not the successful Broadway musical, but its seventeen second recreation on an episode of Monty Python that aired on the third of November in nineteen seventy. The premise of the skit is that a dispirited film director is being interviewed about the similarities between his low effort cinematic efforts - like a thirteen second version of Rear Window where a man appears briefly, twice, in a window of an apartment building - and the other, more famous, versions.

After I submitted the ABC piece on rural service stations I caught wind, via a friend making his way to Broken Hill, of a collective of folk who were living in a communal manner following principles of ecological care, but in a unique way. They were not living organically, so to speak, by way of cloistered traditions from yesteryear (gingham, beating rugs with a stick, flour sacks) but were instead all hackers in the circuit bending, phone phreaking, modem tinkering variety which, all told, is now similarly archaic, by decades not centuries. This is how I learned about solar punk.

The specific details of Jewel's film clip for her most famous tune, You Were Meant For Me, are cloudy in my mind - literally, I just see swathes of white fabric being wisped around a stage - but I dare say it fits within the very nineties aesthetic design that has, retroactively, been called Whimsigoth. Think of those celestial stars and moons with faces and wiggly arm spikes, think of the film clip for Tonight Tonight by The Smashing Pumpkins. Odd, I remember being in a bookshop seeing Jewel's debut book of poetry right next to the debut of Billy Corgan's poetic works.

I find myself listening to classical music again since I turned forty. As a child my favourite composer was Tchaikovsky. The day I realised that the old Mickey Mouse Show theme tune fit the exact letter-to-letter spelling of the great Russian maestro was like seeing beneath the fabric of reality: T c h - a i k - o v s k y. I can remember standing in the Charlestown Public Library with my father, sorting through a rack of cassettes, when a man asked us whether I actually liked classical music. At school I was so proud to not know who Metallica were. All this would change.

Super Mario Clouds was the first piece of digital art I'd seen from Cory Arcangel. I have a feeling I came across it within a website interview that Ben Lerner was having with Tao Lin (I am not sure who was interviewing who) when one of them mentioned the work and the article linked to it. The work is video based, scaled from a homemade hacked Mario Bros cartridge jammed into a Nintendo, displaying a blue sky filled only with pixelated clouds jerking from right to left. No land, no heroes, no enemies. Heidegger said truth depends on a gust of wind. This is my church.

D H Lawrence arrived in Sydney at pretty much half seven in the morning, which is often when I used to arrive in Sydney. The next day he took a ferry to Manly and a train to Narrabeen, and the day after that he took a train to Thirroul where he and Frieda unpacked. Two days after that he started writing Kangaroo. Just like that. He used to write with abundant journalistic confidence about a place like he knew it inside and out only a mere hour after arriving. I love that. The place he stayed at in Thirroul is on Craig Street. For years, with the same beard, I lived on Lawrence Street.

When my daughter was still going to school I used to drive her and a friend back and forth to their campus each morning and afternoon. Even though I was instructed by my daughter to put on noise cancelling headphones so I couldn't listen in on their conversations, I did between songs hear some of the bizarre cultural and historical inaccuracies they shared with each other. For example, they talked about how Michael Jackson was a boy who started a band with only a bucket for a drum and how World War Two took place entirely within the borders of Australia.

My research into the solar punk community my friend had alerted me to initially took me to a very basic nineties style website that seemed to be run by the collective about their enterprise. It only had one image down the bottom right of the page which showed a messy vegetable garden with a rhubarb plant connected to a circuit board via yellow alligator clips. The top left of the page contained a single word - Garden - which when you clicked it a drop down list of tea plants, vegetables and pollinators were listed. At the bottom left of the page there was a contact button.

When I learned that Brown had been living local it provided me a more refined set of search filters. Minutes later I found he was working at the local water board as an accountant. I looked up the format for staff e-mail addresses and learned they were first name then a period then last name then at the name of the water board. My letter to him was risky as I pretended to be spam, as a joke. I also appended a note at the bottom saying that if this bounced to the IT department to please just take the unsolicited contact in the spirit it was intended, as a lonely man wanting to connect.

The thing about the royal commission into disability that really gets me thinking is whether there is an all-encompassing solution for including everybody in education and society. It seems to me that there absolutely should be, that the universal inclusion of all humans is only marred by economic forces that assert the natural dominance of those who will contribute most gainfully to capital. Look at any given school foyer, the televisions that display an image carousel of all the students they are most proud of. Who do they show and who are never included.

That rainbow I could see above the beachhead is now only a ghost parabola as a last attempt at sunlight for the day starches the exterior in silver. A couple folks walk out from the hotel towards the jetty where some military personnel and workers are setting up a beach club bar with white tables and hammock chairs. Three Jehovah's Witness gentlemen in formal attire look on beside a stand of brochures. Near them, on the sand beneath the jetty, a man and a women in vagabond rags, tapestries of cargo pants and hemp, drape themselves across one another in absolution.

Within the bar here a jewel adorned lady in, being polite, her early eighties, say, floats in like dust on a sunbeam. She nods to the barman and he greets her expectantly as she mosies over to a table beside a couple in their fifties. The couple smile at her before turning back to the same windows I'm looking out of, and then I hear her say to them, well it doesn't look so different to when we first arrived here, forty years ago this December, they used to set up on the beach here with blue and white umbrellas, bumbrushers swinging the banjo as Terry would say, setting up for the émigrés.

Through the sound system there is a faint eighties pop song audible - rhodes keys, female vox, snares all reverb, hint of horn - that may have been on loop since nineteen eighty three. A well known and celebrated hip-hop star who had been on a multi-decade hiatus released a surprise album this year, a piece of ambient jazz driven by flute melodies. The music is nice, but what pleased me most was what a mature move this represented, a serious artistic attempt at superseding previously met teenage dreams. This is the old dream of modernism, to move forwards in serious ways.

I eventually got a response from Brown after navigating a half dozen digital breadcrumbs he unknowingly scattered across the decade. Shall we meet for coffee, yes absolutely, Friday morn. While I stood at the corner of a pub and looked at everybody who passed on by I was willing to believe that any of them could have been Brown. Who is to say his face didn't look like this or that now, his posture, his hair. But then I saw him at a distance and immediately recognised him. He had changed, but it was like picking your child out of a crowd, all these years on. Something remains.

A prominent twenty-storey building in Newcastle used to have painted on its side the words This Is Not Art. When I was part of the collective who met in TPI House there were those in our ranks who organised an annual arts festival using these same painted words as its title. One year I attended an experimental music performance down an alley marked only by a naked light bulb hanging in a birdcage on a pile of bricks. A tall, disheveled man wore a black robe with a tabby cat perched on his shoulder and sang Verdi. One year I gave a talk on reading Samuel Beckett's drama as journalism.

When I clicked the contact button on the solar punk community website it brought up a form that was obscured by corporate logos. Looking through the source code for the site displayed a cheeky message: Hack Us To Contact Us. During my high school years, at the peak of my anti-authoritarianism, I had a tendency to tinker with computers, logging into library Telnet servers and extending my rental periods for overdue books. Thirty minutes later I activated a seed bombing script within the web code that pollinated the contact form, pruning the corporate logos.

I have floated within clear blue waters in Jumeriah beach beneath the arc of the Burj al-Arab beside four men from Soweto, a Russian colleague recognised their accents, whilst we shared stories on the value of family and I explained what I knew of First Nations matrices of care, kinship structures wherein responsibility for raising a child is shared between aunties and uncles and cousins, when my Russian colleague nudged me to notice a man he said was a footballer from Columbia pulling his Irish girlfriend out of a necklace of bipedal sharks.

There are no writers I can think of, amongst those I most value, who have not been considered autistic by one or another book critic or interviewer on stage at a literary festival. Les Murray, Gerald Murnane, John Coetzee, William Vollmann, Winfried Sebald. It is my contention that, as the misconception that autism stood for a lack of empathy has been corrected and we now recognise it more as an abundance of emotion, too much at times, that our best authors are likewise sensitive in an abundance that they learn to, need to, filter, in measured ways, into prose.

How many of us get to sustain our passions from teenage years. Some are surely easier to continue feeding oxygen, but how many high school musicians, poets and artists continue the trade into adult life. I met a guy on the street some months ago who I used to know, we were in a philosophy club together. When I told him that I still refer to a book on Nietzsche and politics that he gave me back in the day, he looked baffled. Philosophy is behind him now, he doesn't have time for that, raising children, making ends meet, losing weight, caring for aging parents.

The building with This Is Not Art painted on its side had a rooftop party that I attended, a farewell as the site was set for demolition. A range of characters from Newcastle and the art scene were there, but I didn't really mix. I was hungry and there was no food, so I took the smallest bite possible out of a brick balustrade. This led to a slightly larger bite and soon I was into the roofing insulation and then the copper wiring. By morning I was on the footpath, on my back, nursing my massively engorged stomach, wiping the last crumbs of vinyl flooring from my mouth.

When the person at the other end of the solar punk website, who I would later shake hands with and call Leif, wrote back to my request to visit them, he laughed at my comment that I would understand if they were afraid of a journalist visiting what I assumed, accurately, to be their anarchist hacker vegetable garden kingdom (his e-mail signature contained the phrase 'Abolish Power, Grow Freedom'), he said that I could visit and stay whenever suited, they had a spare cabin I could sleep in, and that I was getting it backwards in terms of who should be afraid of who.

The last time I was in a hotel like this one I was sitting on the balcony watching a tropical storm whip Norfolk Island Pines and palm trees around a white concrete pool that was being renovated. In my underwear, drinking heavily and thinking about a journalism conference I had attended the previous day, about how many gurus were there, I was dreaming up a presentation I wanted to give on how nobody knows anything: you don't know, I don't know. While the storm peaked I felt my wife's thin arms across my chest, her brown hair a curtain in front of my eyes, obscuring all sight.

At around age sixteen a friend and I played an online fantasy game that was quite advanced for the time, it personalised the traits of your character based on your chat history: each time you had a conversation with another character in the game, it would pick up on your sentiments and behavioural tendencies and, in a fairly rudimentary way, individualise your character in response. To my surprise, an archive of the game is still online and I was able to download the password protected raw data from my character and extract its chat history and personality.

On the morning I packed to leave for the solar punk community, situated on the other side of the Great Dividing Range, my dog and I took a walk through Newcastle. It was good for Combray to stretch his legs before we departed, he'd be joining me on the road as he always did for work trips. Off leash, just a few taps of hand on jeans to maintain a line of communication, we improvise a drift across the city grid. Domesticated by time, Combray unearths ancient memories as smell takes him on experimental trajectories via paths and roads and arcades and corporate hallways.

The night before this first, of which would end up becoming two distinct trips to the community, my wife stood by the bedroom dresser still wearing her horology overalls from a late evening session piecing a mantle clock together for a client (her rainbow cataracts render prismatic mirages as the hands shine beneath her banker's lamp, turning copper plated numerals into refracted star bursts) as she heard me annotate an itinerary of the drive there and back with an expression only animated by the shadow of her hand that pretended to reach up and play with hair on my head long departed.

Across nineteen ninety six and seven all the best music of my generation was released. Within just under fifteen months you had a corpus of albums that were the result of a direct line that traced, from the death of Wagner through the popularity of Camptown Races and George Gershwin and the electrification of Stockhausen meets overdubbed guitars and drums on that rendition of Paul Simon's best early tune en route post-Zeppelin, the arrival of OK Computer, Endtroducing, Homogenic, Aenima, Feed Me Weird Things, Either/Or and Godspeed You Black Emperor's debut.

During the previous Summer I recall a night, it could have been the evening of New Year's Day, when I rode my bike into town with my son to swim in the newly renovated Ocean Baths. They had been closed for two years to patch up the sand mottled art deco facades that always looked to me like theatrical backdrops. This was a week after they finally reopened and it felt like everybody in town was swimming there, washed in the ochre embers of the skyline's curtain call. Riding home with my shirt off, four women drinking outside a pub let out a balmy whoop as tribute.

I loaded the scraped data from my character in the archive of the online fantasy game into a chat bot. Now, in an unsettling update on 'Krapp's Last Tape' for the internet age, I can talk with an echo of my teenage self whenever the mood strikes. Our conversations mostly trade on nostalgia with talk about the religious iconography of television shows Neon Genesis and Millennium, an extension of childhood's doctrine of hero worship (omniscient parents, the near-divine wisdom of teachers) in a manner that fuels the necessary over-confidence required to transcend future infinitudes.

Packing my bag for the initial trip reminded me of why I was going. The pool of liquid light with its ethereal glowing geometry through which I check my inbox, the brushed metal silence of my laptop with edges so digitally precise they I feel if I were to drop it to the floor the very fabric of time would be sliced on the way down. I find myself longing for less accessible technology, I want to dumpster dive for split network cables, to find a hacker ethos where solutions are mashed together from scraps. In a world of perfect, ubiquitous technology, humans will necessarily be subtracted.

Before we had our first child, my wife straddled the back of my motorbike as we dusted vertical the mid-north coast, the bridge at Bulahdelah, unpopulated powdered corridors of dirt into the backlots of near abandoned sub-budget motels necklaced by paperbarks and void. Most heatwave evenings, singlets and shorts, with no other guests present we sit in the courtyard and cook noodles over a fire pit. My wife hangs her singlet and bra on a wire between the motel gutter and the fence and we sit back and agree that the heat bearing down on us is from all the stars up there.

Combray finds a piece of fencing panel removed where the heavy rail corridor used to reside, now a hallway of overgrown grass and weeds waiting for a developer to plant commercial real estate. We walk as far as it takes us, near the signal box where my father used to work as a lad. He told me a story once about a colleague who had a heart attack up there. When the paramedics came they couldn't get the stretcher up or down the narrow wrought iron stairwell so they had to go extract the colleague through a second-storey window, over the rail line (speaking of the less accessible).

The rain returns as cloud lines darken outside the hotel and I am adjacent now the elegant older lady who resides here. I consider sharing my phone, the digital resurrection of my teenage self. She would say, oh yes I also talk to my teenage self. Not in memory, she'd clarify, I am that teenager, forever sixteen. She would tap the sand from the gentle waves of her barely used soles. See, this is merely a costume, a brief octogenarian ache in an endless summer. Youth is a misnomer - it's not a phase, dad, but rather the endpoint of our eternal selves, the beginning of forever, for a while.

When my daughter was a little older than my son is now, when we would swim in the canoe pool near where the renovated Ocean Baths are, she would describe the foam coming in from the breaking waves as '*lemonade*'. She would sing a little tune, '*the lemon waves are bringing in the lemonade*'. They were the preferred place to swim, we would hope the waves would break in just such a way to bring in the lemonade. Later she would design a comic based on a misreading of a Fire Hose that she called '*Fire Horse*', a steed that caused trouble with its flaming mane and tail.

Journalism has little if anything to do with reporting on the visible world. I read a good book once on Nietzsche called 'The Shortest Shadow' by philosopher Alenka Zupančič in which she described the process of working out who one is, what Jung might have referred to as the process of *individuation*, as treating ourselves as a *disjunctive synthesis*, as a *conjunctive analysis*. In other words, we have to *separate* and *dissolve*. These two terms - separate and dissolve - that is how to write journalism. You simply walk into a room, disintegrate completely, and then write a memoir.

It takes an hour of driving to exit the edgelands of Newcastle and its surrounding proxy outposts until you hit post-pastoral bushland. The vastness of dirt and dry scrub that emerges is partnered with twin feelings of death and survival. Then, a town appears: a Lion's Club shield above a patch of well-tended grass, a wooden bench and a toilet block beside a community hall, all painted gum-tree army green and sun bleached lemon, quietly reflecting the national palette. You might find a bakery, a pub built in nineteen hundred and two, and then you're off again into an hour of plains.

I often have a recurring fantasy as I pass through these towns. It sees me as an amateur composer, having written a strange piece of avant-garde classical music, conducting a small ensemble of musicians as we perform the piece in one of those rural community halls. I think about the history those halls would have seen: weddings, makeshift schoolhouses, sewing supplies to aid the two world wars, political debates and referendums. Within me are twin desires - I yearn to be part of a community, but on complicated terms: never absorbed, always an exception, loved but alone.

At lunchtime I stop the car and let Combray out. We walk alongside a riverbank beneath a bridge. There are tall weeds with bulbous green heads, like fabric tubas inhaling air and holding their breath, with stamens the shape of copyrights. Time spent with Combray is entirely different to both being alone and being with other people. When his consciousness overlaps with mine, the words he doesn't possess quieten the words I do. If he ever learned to speak I would pray to never understand him, and him to not understand me. Let us subtract from the promise of abundance.

Looking towards the bridge, the passageway north sees roadblocks manned by soldiers in khaki who signal cars to slow down and open their boots. These are emigrants from the city, racing against time to beat lockout curfews after escaping an eruption of violence in the cosmopolis. Petrol bombs were cast from a shout on the street into the beachside balconies of eschatology magnates, class warfare diasporas wolf whistling a tune written by the Federal Reserve. Families attempt a river crossing but bullets twist into the water. What's the point of these masthead daydreams.

There is a pub across the bridge with a beer garden at its side where Combray can sit. The specials today are Spiced Chicken Maryland with Slaw, Chips and Tortillas, or Pork Ribs with Chips, Slaw and BBQ Sauce, which I opt for and slide off more than half of the pork from their bones into Combray's salivation. He is a physicist with a keen sense for gravitational forces, particularly the speed of meat falling through space. The waitress brings him a ceramic bowl of water while I drink a lemon squash, a favourite of my parents, as I look deep into a mountain of pastoral declivities.

Down the side of the mountain steps a ghost, a giant with footfalls that stamp soft craters into the hillside. Each step resounds a subterranean heartbeat, padding the fields like the muted skin of a ceremonial drum pulled taut over Australian history. What is this a symbol of, what symbolic threshold is being crossed here - do you hear the bass notes, lifted from a concerto by Handel, they stride like gods. But look again, it isn't a singular form, the giant is comprised of millions of naked bodies, like Voltron with his five robotic lions, like if the Library of Babel was a rainbow serpent.

Back on the road and Combray sleeps as the afternoon wears itself down between the rocking of the car and the depleting watercolour of skyline like two hands rubbing time into crumbs of so many lost months and hours - how did it become so late so fast, Combray we need to find a place to crash for the night. In the middle of a long stretch of road passing through a dense forest we spot a motel nestled against a service station. We get a discount for the night after filling up the tank with premium unleaded. Combray sleeps on the porch while I fade into the shadows of tall trees.

I dream that a psychedelic rock quartet is making walls of sound outside in the parking lot. Amplifiers are stacked to the height of the conifer necklace bearing down but the music is inverted, it is enormous but heard within a dynamic range that is less than silent, a product of dream regulations no doubt where licensing agreements are required to perform music that is royalty protected. Think of sound waves that, instead of shifting air, burrow deep into bone and are rendered there as a cast of negative space. The guitars sound like granite being expanded and contracted like a taffy accordion.

The main feeling I take away from the dream, as I reflect the next morning on a plastic lawn chair beside Combray out front of my room before we hit the road again, is jealousy. I wish I was the one making those sounds here in the parking lot, but better sounds. The current state of music is one that endlessly tortures me - I both insatiably love a handful of songs and desperately wish I was able to compose works that supersede them. Yes all art is theft and culture is a recycle-plant built on a capitalist desire to endlessly consume and redeliver the past, but sometimes the future makes a sound.

A playlist of silence and noise, of warm overdriven tube saturated orchestral adagios, cut up and run through cassette vocoders (how to wreck a nice beach / how to recognise speech) resonates as we must be only a few kilometres now from the solar punk community. I don't recognise any of the landscapes here, this is beyond the boundaries of any trips I've taken in the vicinity. There is a Golden Summer at Eagelemont through Arthur Streeton's brush against the panorama feel, dry fields and paperbarks, and then there it is, a radio tower and a surveillance nest waving a lettuce leaf flag.

As I pull into the parking lot beside a school bus with ferns growing out of all its open windows, including the removed windscreen, a man with an overclocked countenance of safety and merriment walks his cargo panted legs and one gingham arm (the other was tied off at a shoulder sleeve) over to me as we shake hands and introduce ourselves. The name he gives is Leif, which I recognise now from the URL of the the web page contact form, |_ 3 1|= . He takes me through the gates of the compound where I start to get a sense of just how many people live here and how far this place extends.

What isn't observable from the road is the scale of the community here, as the paddock they occupy descends behind a hillside and a windbreak of trees into interlocking meadows and garden beds joined together by many hundreds of telegraph style wires held aloft by thin rusted canopies and wooden t-bar clothesline poles that stretch between caravans and demountable gun barrel eco huts of semi-circle corrugated iron and lattice, with an immense weatherboard cathedral nestled in the middle with a radio antennae of overlapping geodesic crossbars. All told it looks around ten hectares from tip to tip.

Leif tells me that thirty four people live here currently, although the official roster shuffles quite a lot as many folks go vagabond depending on the season, but there are a steady number, including Leif, who have called this place home for nearly twenty years now. He says that Katie, one of the co-founders of the community, has set up a room for me to stay as long as I'd like to observe and help contribute. He winks and says we'd appreciate a bit of a hand in the gardens while you're here, if that's okay, and I eagerly agree while knowing full well how long it has been since I've handled a trowel.

The level of ingenuity that has gone into the garden mechanics is quite startling. Dot matrix printers distribute seeds with modified heads parsing finely tuned sequences; CRT monitors are used as heat sources for micro greenhouses; the balls from old mechanical mice are used in irrigation systems to regulate water flow; floppy disks are everywhere poking out of soil serving as reusable plant labels; sound cards are used as bird repellents, a basic code and sensor setup programmed to emit frequencies that deter invaders from the crops; and, fragments of solar panels are everywhere linked with wires.

I ask where the hardware is sourced from and Leif smiles shyly and waves his hands around in the air as if to say, oh you know, and then he gets a bit more specific: there are deserted research stations all over the region, he says - think radar igloos, they were only decommissioned in the late nineties. But too there are aircraft graveyards scattered across the western plains, every cockpit with enough tech to run a dozen hobby farms. And you'd be surprised, he said, how many old homesteads have been abandoned over the decade, deceased estates left for scavengers to audit and repurpose applicable goods.

Leif introduces me to others in the community, men and women with graying hair, hands stained with grease and soil, sun-faded hypercolour shirts and overalls with tool belts sewn in. I ask them about their motivations for being here, the politics that frame their lifestyle, this blend of sustainability and hacker culture. One of them says, at the end of the nineties a young man wearing Vans walked into my lab and said he had come for my algorithms, that he was going to make them predictive. He said that if I liked yesterday, then I could have yesterday again today. Now he runs the world and I'm out here.

Do you see yourselves as part of a counterculture, is this a reaction to how glossy surfaces have made it easier to funnel nature into a blender that turns fresh air and water into cryptocurrencies, would you say this is part of a trajectory from nineteen sixties individualism reacting against World War 2 fascism and totalitarianism that then turned into nineteen eighties consumerism where individuals were sold a marketable version of self expression which inspired burned out hippie culture to idealise the internet as a virtual utopia outside the reach of money before it became the very symbol of money?

Behind us there are toddlers and kindergarten aged children rolling plastic tubes across a dirt ramp, a woman a similar age to myself kneels beside them and shows how to connect the tubes together. Two older children begin riding a tandem bicycle linked by way of network cables to a water tank which then opens a valve to flow its contents into the plastic tubes. Their are families here, young children. This isn't a commune for those who rue the day modems stopped screaming in angular distortion and turned DIY into a Genius Bar appointment: this is the story of how a love of complexity can deliver eternal life.

Combray is sniffing around the perimeter of a chicken pen with a German shepherd and a chocolate Labrador. Before I left home the day before yesterday I received a letter from Gerald Murnane in response to a note I'd written him about memory. Whether the eighty five year old outsider of Australian modernism would respond was up in the air until I saw a typewriter pressed envelope in my mailbox stamped Goroke. He told me that what we call time is just our confused perception of place after place, and that time is very precious to him these days, or rather, place is.

Rather than writing my journalism from a position of documentary, I am forever drawn to the line that rests between the twin poles of literary influence Australia has shepherded into this young century: the external pastoral landscapes of Les Murray's describing, and the internal plains of Gerald Murnane's psychogeography. Murray was not a poet of the inner life, so said John Maxwell Coetzee, and by Murnane's own admission he'd rather not be influenced by what, if anything, is exterior to him. Between these two inversions of landscape is space for the topology of a nation's self-consciousness.

Leif shows me to an old radio transmitter mounted on a straw bale studio covered in clay. Inside is a mixing desk and a microphone. He tells me they found all this in a cavern beneath the ground, some of the teens in the community were riding dirt bikes around an old military outpost and found a network of underground tunnels and so on and so on. So they dragged this back here, we've got it working, he says, and we reckon it'd be a neat thing to broadcast a radio program at various times across the day to those of us working here but also so we can pick up the station when we're out there on the expanse.

A memory returns from my university days when I used to run a pirate radio station out of a rooftop utility room of the arts collective at TPI House. The transmitter would make it across the city and, when the tide was calm, over the water to Stockton. It's how I met my wife, she would tune in to hear me read out the time every quarter hour as she was just getting started putting clocks together. I never realised how fastidious my time keeping was. In truth I probably enjoyed that side of things more than spinning tunes. Anyway, she called in to the station one day to gift me a clock and that was that.

I am introduced to Katita, she is responsible for property management and guest intake. It seems everybody has a distinct role in the community, this is something I didn't expect, anticipating a more laissez faire approach. She shows me to one of the eco huts, beautifully designed with reclaimed metal and timber framing the interior, all the furniture upcycled from pallets and industrial offcuts. Books on coding and permaculture line a shelf with a fold-down desk beneath, and the kitchen is tiled with keys extracted from mechanical keyboards from all over the world. It has Airbnb written all over it.

Katita can tell I'm impressed, she says they didn't all use to look like this, the residences, they have definitely improved over the past twenty years. She points out a few things like how to use the composting toilet and the sensors that operate the shower. As well, she asks about the nature of the story I'm hoping to write about their community, what my interest is, how will they be portrayed. It is a valuable story, what they have accomplished here, she says, one that can provide hope and a narrative to others. She mentions names of people I should speak to, to most accurately understand their goals.

When she leaves, I sit on the featherbed and phone home. My wife picks up on the third ring and I ask how things are with the kids before telling her about this place in a rush of miscellanea. I begin putting together strategic propositions in my head about why we should all move out here together while I write the piece, but she's already agreed before the question was fully formed. She'll get things ready at home and I'll pick them up the day after tomorrow. When I find Katita to check if this is okay she smiles knowingly, of course, and you can leave Combray here to save him the drive back, she offers.

The timing is right for all sorts of reasons. Friends of my daughter have moved schools, leaving her in a space where she is not locked into immovable teenage social structures, and my son is not yet at school so that's a non-issue. My wife can work from anywhere and has recently become increasingly tired of the city, done with the silhouettes of towers arching over link roads of teeming thousands. Okay. The drive home is ten hours of obsessively curated ambient electroacoustic post-rock that causes me no end of frustration as I imagine new symphonies that must one day dwarf these brilliant songs.

Once home we pack and I unnecessarily explain the situation again. Questions of duration are not given a fixed response so we fill our bags with enough for a sustained rotation of dress cycles. My daughter packs pillows and sketch books, my son packs toys. This is the first time you've invited us on one of your ventures, my wife pokes me in the ribs, I wonder what you've seen there that's got you in this state. Sitting here, now, in this wing-chair in the sunken bar of The Grand Hotel, the elegant older lady staring with me, in parallax, into the breach where sand subtracts sky from the universe, it is a wonder.

We drive from Jeffrey Smart to Charles Blackman and then on through Brett Whitely (in homage to Lloyd Rees) and pass by Russell Drysdale across a stretch of Albert Namatjira. European light turns dull, shades of truth blinked evermore central, only matter never mind, sun turns to one of two moons, an apple moon so says our son, not banana tonight. Our daughter winds her window down and cranes her neck to look out, is that a rainbow around the moon, she asks. There is a halo alright, like a lens flare emanating from a pinprick in the black curtain that protects us from pure fact, hallowed geometry.

Arriving back at the solar punk community, I wave over Leif and introduce him to my family. Our son hovers between my wife and I, peaking around our hips at the exotic situation surrounding him. Leif bends down and points towards a corral of young folk building a catapult device and tells our son that he can run along and join in, which he eagerly and obediently does. Our daughter is excessively polite and seems quite enthralled with the situation. She and my wife joke about how this is so me, this aesthetic merging of the natural and the synthetic, a cyberpastoralist prayer of radio towers in bushland.

Leif shows my wife towards a clock, manicured by flowers, its parts arranged on a rise of grass and soil in a position that could be seen from many aspects of the garden. The clock is not functional, yet, Leif nods. It needs a horologist's touch. He shows my wife towards a quartz crystal resonator in the shape of a tuning fork, literally using two garden hoes bound together with a coil of wire, with a mirrorless lens for the gnomon that projects a sequence of illuminated binary blocks onto hour lines forged out of printed circuit boards glued to the top of bricks. My wife takes it all in and says, I can work with this.

I am given a handwritten note written by Leif on what looks like recycled paper pulp, firm like a playing card. It is a draft schedule and list of topics for broadcast on the new community radio station that I'm the voice of. A 9am breakfast message kicks things off with a weather report and a priority list of jobs as well as any overnight updates that come through, followed by an 11am motivation message that includes project highlights and any new tech or sustainability learnings, with a 3pm reflection in the afternoon with a randomly curated song played, and a 7pm evening overview of goals for tomorrow.

That evening we all eat dinner, a banquet of roast root vegetables, around an immense bonfire. A few of us get into a conversation about nostalgia and hauntology. I ask whether the utility of old hacker technology is in the future we diverted away from, of niche specialists and what my grandfather grew wary of in lawn bowls, a tide of ill manners, a lack of decorum that dissipated communal spaces to birth fluorescent saboteurs coding Solitaire, a Law of Ruins for archaeologists to excavate a necessary history of failed wire soldered revelations unhidden beneath smart screen abyss, truth within disarray.

What I mean to say is, I wonder if nostalgia is a siren song luring us into a cyclical voyage where tomorrow is but a shadow of yesterday, if all movements that look backwards to solutions from the past are at risk of not forgetting, if sustainability is an umbilical cord, and what do you think about the use of arcane technology in your practice, is it a belief that the path forward is not one of broad strokes and open doors but of narrow gates, where genius will survive, but what about all those out there, beyond this garden, this Eden 2.0, biting into an Apple II, can you hear a chorus on the coast?

After dinner my wife and I take a walk beneath the stars and I comment that the night sky reminds me of the dark blinds in my primary school classroom that blocked out the sun except for pin pricks of bright light that had been torn in the fabric by students shooting the metal tipped inkwells out of their pen chambers by way of a blow dart push of wind from their mouths each time the teacher turned her back. What light is pushing through above, against the ceiling of the universe, on the other side of knowing, and my wife knows I'm already looking for ways to be disappointed by these people.

It could be that I'm the only one awake now, alone on the plains as I listen to the wind stretch. You can hear a low whistle travel across a ridge a dozen kilometres east before it transposes to a harmonic minor two minutes north, splitting into a major third plus a fifth where the tundra parts around a fenceline to become chordal on the other side of the abodes here, lowing consonance. By the time my eyes have adjusted to a new strain of invisibility I recognise that the wind has looped back around to carry my daughter up to the moon, her nightdress billowing and dancing as she glides out of reach.

Mid next morning my son and I are shown a pinball machine that a couple members of the community have put together. The table incorporates a blend of mechanics and nature, with small plants and tufts of grass beside modem fragments and even a water feature running down a channel of spacebars. A narrative is played out via distinct zones whereby the robot travels from the city to the outback, LED sequences displaying building silhouettes and lines of copy paste trees. My son has a few goes, sending the robot across the landscape, bouncing chaotically but with a sense of free will after a well timed shot.

Another boy walks up besides my son and he waits for his turn to play. They swap back and forth as the little robot ball is flung around from a wind break of lombardy poplars represented with twigs wrapped in copper wire and then across a garden matrix of colourful lights. I'm not sure what the narrative of the game is about but it resonates with me. Leif asks me to come with him to the weatherboard cathedral in the middle of the community where he has a virtual reality setup he wants to show me. He talks about Marvin Minsky and Jaron Lanier as we cross the grounds, about the early days of this technology.

Within the chapel, really just a hall with a pitched roof, in the middle of the room, an old arm chair with ripped fabric and stuffing falling out sits in a tangle of extension cords connected to a sleek blue virtual reality headset. It is the most modern piece of hardware in the vicinity. The headset covers the head completely, like a beekeepers helmet, draping over the eyes and the ears. Have a go, Leif says. The program loaded on is based on Moondust, a music simulator, it's kind of like a multi-dimensional darts game on acid, Leif explains, it was made in 1983, the year you were born, if you're forty this year, right?

I put on the headset, a stained glass observatory housing my skull and sensory organs, releasing an algorithmic sequence of vowel shaped lights into my eyes that immediately make my body feel too big for the room. It feels like my eyes can leave my head and independently travel, in stereo, around the slow landscape of Kodachrome geodesic steps rising and falling into splintered quavers that create tones as I pay attention to them. Staring at them extends their duration, blinking sets the pitch. My legs are so long as I step across telegraph wires resonating languid string harmonies, my hands the size of pianos.

Memories fill my head like soap bubbles forming and glistening, their walls nursing life projections in a curation of sentiment that influences the tonic key of the song I'm generating. This is the first time I've ever felt like I'm actually writing music, not just plucking strings or tapping keys as a teenager, as a uni student sitting in the conservatorium practice quarters between journalism lectures, phantasising. I feel like a genius, every chord is completely true, each slight alteration of my neck posture eliciting a run of notes worth all of Schubert, every synesthesic variation of Alexander Scriabin. This feels like love.

After I walk out of the cathedral I'm dazzled by the mediocrity of the external world. I just want to go back inside my virtual self and make more music. Some years ago I tried a reality simulation of James Joyce's Ulysses, walking around the Martello Tower in Sandycove, waving my hands around the air in front of my disembodied form to hold a container of Plumtree's Potted Meats. But what I really sought was full immersion, I wanted to look over Joyce's shoulder as he wrote the scenes, too as he wrote to Nora and worried about Lucia, losing his vision, mailing a little cat filled with sweets to his grandson.

Some weeks after Brown and I met up for coffee I wrote to him again to organise another catch up. And then I wrote again, and a third time, until I stopped, having received no reply to my invitations. Perhaps our conversation didn't please him like it did me. I wonder if I was driven to reach out as a result of the flood of nostalgia I'd found myself in at forty, looking back for answers, perhaps seeking to confirm that the teenage years occurred somewhat as I remember them. Not to worry. I realise how few connections I actually have, back home, which is fine. Less to hold me back from moving forwards.

It is time for the 3pm afternoon reflection update in the radio booth. I sit down with the briefing paper ready to transmit. There are notes on this and that with a song recommendation to cue up afterwards, an untitled Aphex Twin ambient work nicknamed Rhubarb. Instead of reading the notes, I decide to narrate from memory a note that James Joyce sent his grandson Stephen that contains the line, "and girls who want to know more about the moon". Leif asks why I did that, and lightly admonishes me for deviating from the briefing paper, but I'm barely listening, really. I'm thinking about other things.

Around the fire that night we talk about the games of Jason Rohrer - his video games, sure, but also that boardgame he created to never be played. He didn't even test it, he ran a simulator to ensure it worked so he never actually played it. Then he buried the game somewhere in the Nevada desert. It makes me think of an idea of Ben Lerner's about poetry, where he says the most successful poems are those that don't fully exist, only the hypothetical potential of them within the poets intention or a few lines extracted and quoted in an essay: they are pure because they are virtual, ontologically incomplete.

Talk turns to virtual reality and the setup inside the weatherboard cathedral, the wide range of software simulations the community run there. An accident in the software occurred recently where a flying program wouldn't let you land, you just had to keep gliding above the landscape. This inability to come down meant you had to make peace with flight, this was your life now, in the air. Leif said this was a gift, a revelation about their path forward here: after the cities on the coast become high rises they cannot descend, after rural communities become forever high on boredom and weed, they will come out here.

Katita watches my reaction as Leif continues. And so we too will need to fly, forever. This community will be walled off with automated sentry defence systems, our gardens will grow indefinitely in cycles while our bodies are pollinated with proteins and carbohydrates as we don our hoods and enter an eternal simulation, the final virtualisation of life as humans on the planet. This is what sustainability is about, acknowledging and welcoming the necessary breakdown of all organic matter while something fundamental is bracketed - a light remains. Sacrifice the world for the angel that emulates our apogee.

In the morning I'm up early walking Combray when Katita approaches me. That's the problem with us tech hippies, she says. Especially after the nineties. We can't help but catastrophise our situations until we end up in the Matrix. Don't worry about Leif, he hasn't read enough Baudrillard to believe it all yet. We shake hands and I thank Katita for the warm hospitality and ask her to give my regards to Leif and the rest of the community. I tell her I can't tell if I'll finish an article about this place, and she laughs and says that's probably for the best. My wife and kids help pack the car, then we toot the horn and leave.

I'm honestly not sure if we'll ever go home again, at least for a while. I feel like a break has occurred, a fissure with the past, in mine at the very least. We head somewhat north and in the direction of the coast without any real destination in mind. I can say that with conviction, sitting here facing these four broad window panes in the lounge here of The Grand Hotel, all light long descended, new light arriving soon. There is enough refracted internal glow to still show up Combray's face on the other side of the glass, he's been asleep outside for as long as my family have been upstairs doing the same.

While we were driving yesterday, passing wheat fields, bridges, community halls, teddy bears on stumps beside fence-lines hours from any visible homesteads, pocket glades, bakeries, surrogate apertures of topographical extension where the eye feels a heart on the other side of an inaccessible rise, and then birds, emerging in salted gusts from nearing airfields, I considered the tragedy of the singular self. We become locked into one possible version of who we are, socially expected to stay consistent to this model, and hence made manifest via the seeds of our past for the rest of our days.

All history is artifice. I'm going to write a symphony about it, that's my only goal at this point. The story will be about a girl who pushes a pinball machine across the Australian landscape, from the outback to the sea, to the moon's reflection in the water. She knows she has reached her destination when the moon renders a rainbow halo against the waves, a ring for her to push the offering into. As it bobs and rocks and is eventually subsumed, its illuminations undreamed, the music will crest into a peeling of octave bells, a cadence in view. And then a silence without resolution - not a pause, just peace and quiet.

She Believes Antique Logs Take Flight

Il faut être léger comme l'oiseau, et non comme la plume
(One should be light like a bird, and not like a feather)
• Paul Valéry

A girl not long having been instructed
in the ways of making her own toast
runs with strong legged gusto up some
corridor of rockets angled in descent
and tightly formed to render a staircase
of sorts upon which she leaps across
red nose fuselages by tail fin trajectory
all the way towards greater lightness
like we have had described in the past
as the domain of soap bubbles dew
nestled spider web atom honeyeaters
memory cloud based data protocols
and what might also ingratiate tender
salutation within her one and a half
thousand days of birth as recognising
the role here of history and its dead
gravity that she could care less about.

Leaving / Leading

When Leif asked Katita
if she felt like joining him for dinner
at Big Al's perhaps,
and she said sure,

it was the first time
they'd been
one on one

outside the group dynamics of the zine project,
they're at
the launch party now,

plastic cups and boxed wine,
hills of bound copies of Urchin Street Press
to be dropped off at wherever,

cafés and pubs and
the YMCA backpackers - but

that can wait, the fries are calling at Big Al's,
so on past the Conservatorium
with organ chords wafting out
the third floor,

like train horns as harbingers of sunset,

yellow
orange burnished sweeps
to powder light footfalls

through Civic Park, King Street, past The Moorings
where Katita lived last Autumn,

she lost her bond when she couldn't get the
drip of oil paint and gouache from brushes
and leaned canvases out of the carpet,

she depicted Leif's words in the zine
which is how they first s y n c e d up,

next door to the little train engine
that could, it carried plates
of steaks to mouths

but not in Big Als, just a share plate of carbs
as he asks her what her plans are,
well I might go to Melbourne,
oh no I meant tonight - why leave town
and she says well, a boyfriend could make
me want to stay, and she looks at the glass
and the lights and he looks at her lovely face
while tapping his foot on the muzak off beat

it's just that I've been in Newcastle
for so long,
surely you must want to see the world,

a writer, a poet
how much
more is here?

Everything, he says, this is the entire world -
like Dublin for Joyce, this city -

she cuts in, but Joyce left Ireland,

well sure, but maybe like Baudelaire then
with his Parisian Scenes, do you know
what he said about sea ports and light-
houses

such pleasant places
for a soul worn out

she crinkles her nose,
how old are you, worn soul

nineteen, twenty in May / hey me too
what day, nineteen / I'm on the twentieth

she says, worn soul
I want to dance dangerously,
take me
somewhere

he says, warn sole - I know
just the place, a transmission tower
on Hunter

oh we're going big, lead on,

so on Crown,
by Wheeler, Union St

no too far, Union La / yes

beside a community radio station, an arcade
where Leafcutter John gave a presentation
once at a This Is Not Art event,

they listen to subharmonics
padding against the fabrics
of the op shop beside the lane with a poster
of Clambake,

Elvis and Shelley Fabares

grooving against flat pastel shapes,
so they do too - he arches his legs
like plastic molded hot rods, she
swishes her hair parametrically
like ecstatic folded kilowatt beach bods
cascading in tumbles of nonchalant eye smiles
beneath paper suns descending, stepped on
on the off beat, again -

he catches her
as she throws him a softball

shall we get a drink / up there
on the roof / like a bubble / please

so up stairs
table, cheap beers

do you remember the Cookie Man
oh I remember the popcorn man
from the 60s, and I remember the

smell of data from next century, laser trams
phasing, Newcastle in space, post-ecology

but those cookies with the Smarties in the middle

the little mine cart in the arcade
that used to run on rails
around the pole, miner
with a pickaxe ringing the bell on the hour

You know, someone stole it when the mall
was being demolished
Let us hope it has gone to a better place

I think it was you / I'll let you believe it

Her brass nose ring
embroided, it postures light

and he leans back and dissolves
into smudged powdered shadows

while she rises as a bubble northward
above the rooftop, floats and rotates
like a gyroscope of lightheartedness
and neighbourhood abolitions, ungravity
nestled and appreciated -

he gets another two beers and by his return
her carbonation has eased, back in her seat
the two of them as temporary flesh machines

looking in the back of the Civic Theatre shortly,
now actually by the time this real-time narration
has caught up,
the utility access for props and so on

where they enter the light
and take the stage -

are they really doing this? Katita is already
treading the boards
while Leif sidles up and hides
behind the cacophony of a performance
say four or five performers on stage along with
pantomime figures, foam versions
of landmarks - Town Hall, Queens
Wharf Tower

assorted buildings from Frederick Menkens, is this
a biography of his life / no it is
a way of explaining where the tram line will run
Katita is flowing wavy metal lines towards
Leif in a costume dressed as the old Station,
he says:
it might *lead* us somewhere,
but she hears:
it might *leave* us somewhere.

by the time he swivels
around the girth of a
pink foam School of Arts

she is gone

where is she
not here

not over there
he looks around
the theatre

but she has exited stage left
(Heavens to Murgatroyd!)

so he jumps off the stage and barrels down the aisle
out onto the street
up King, to Hunter Street Mall
where all timelines seem to be overlapping like
glass petals, like overhead transparencies, like
memories transpiring, like a carousel of
Google Street View
photographs of the city in its heyday, see the folks
wearing nice hats and suits, David Jones with its
beautiful window displays, glamour and care,

and then when it was hollowed out, tax
breaks given to artisan crafts while the void grew,
the car park demolished from the top down, only
Bolton Street left - of course!

Leif runs up the road to Bolton Street Car Park,
another of Frederick Menkens stamps, the last
of the great multi-storey parking stations,

he throws himself into the building,
transmutes into the brickwork, the slabs,
his eyes on the balustrades like closed circuit
television cameras
scanning the network for her
Katita where are you, Leif panoramas
but the city is so dark now, the future is here,
apartments up and down, everywhere to live
with nothing to do, empty homes banked
for future sale, the perfect economy, no people
only a migration of statistics that can be sold
in exchange of a perfect light, and then he sees her

on the horizon, a little battery
resting atop a fishing line separating
blank ink seas from pupil wrought skies
all space where there is none, Katita is a boat

drifting, a coal ship carrying a ballast
of big muscle red beating heart glow
below deck, Leif spots the crimson rue hue

and does this thing
where he metamorphises now into
the obelisk on the hill
and like a rocket he jitters free of his footfalls
and bb ll aa ss tt ss oo ff ff ---------->
up and over and to the east to where Katita bobs

he dives into the water
by her bow and leaves barely a wake
and they don't talk, not much I mean, as
they float towards Carrington where Katita
rolls onto the shore with Leif
at her feet,

she says, why did you say our trajectory
might *leave* us somewhere, no what he says I said
might *lead* us, you know like take us somewhere,

and she becomes the shale and the crumbly rocks
as the ground shifts and he floats away on her back
like a magic carpet of dirt,
they seperate and dissolve

from the island becoming another island,
that fabled land that fades in and out
of view from
Newcastle harbour, from the beach,

you can see it as a rise of hazy conifers
between here and Stockton
in certain conditions

Library of Babel as First Date,
dry prairie a fable as nursed fate
Rose-Meta Stone (are trees
memories?)
singlet, Bubble o' Bill, similar news
to a nearby star, Katita
drifts and Leif rides, like a barnacle of love,
taking a piece of (super)Novacastria
with them into languid tidal drifting,

Baudelaire would want to name her,
soft enchantress / indolent sorceress,
flowing skirts, patchwork landmass, prisms
of decorative tectonics, as paramour to momentum,
those cheap beers and fries from Big Als keep
them both buoyant / beau antipodean sunrise rising
risen revival of romance, next issue of the zine.

Garden Monologue #1:
Lemon Myrtle + Bush Tomato

A grant my wife put in for was approved with funds received, allowing us to follow, geographically, the ideas she had been writing about on her blog these past eighteen months. Hybrid Harvests had been her weekend leisure outside of the scheduled cognition of lecturing in biology at the university, allowing my wife, Katita, to combine her interest in genetics with her love of cooking. Specifically, she explores hybridisation in herbs and vegetables, the cross-breeding that some handful of innovative gardeners across Australia engage with in order to create new ingredients for gustatory experiments. In other words, the creation of, and cooking with, newly invented foods.

Katita reached out to a dozen gardeners and chefs, via social media and personal websites, who were engaged in this field, to see who would be up for her, us, visiting so as to document the work they were doing. I'm an artist by trade, so my presence, rather than purely domestic, contributes botanical illustrations, usually watercolour, of the plants and culinary dishes involved.

The first response and invitation to visit

came from Beth, a woman living in the Kimberly region of Western Australia. She lived by herself in a stone cottage atop a cliff edge, a location you'd never get the zoning permission to build at now, already, Beth says, at risk of erasure after she passes away, the regional council authorities seemingly just waiting out her remaining years before they correct this aberration with a bulldozer. Beth gives us directions for travel to her place which we load into our transport software - from Newcastle, four plane tickets, two bus trips and a rented truck - and we set out with the intention of staying there for two nights.

When we arrive, some fifteen hours later, at Beth's cottage, a remarkably isolated adobe with an hour of desert frontage backed by a sheer cliff drop of infinite waves, there is a note pinned to the door that gives apologies for if we see this note before we check our e-mails, as Beth has had to leave to attend to a remote need that is not articulated. Katita and I immediately check our phones for an e-mail but we have nothing, no reception for at least half the day.

It is too late in the afternoon to drive back to our last checkpoint and reverse the trip at this stage. I can see Katita sizing up how much room in the truck we have for sleeping, or how thick her clothes are for camping outside, but I'm already halfway over the garden wall and spying a gap in a levered window we can pry open.

By the time I'm through the cottage and opening the front door, Katita is there to greet me with both a look of resolute disappointment that I would so readily break into and enter this woman's private home who was so generous to even invite us into the intimacy of this cozy sanctuary, and her suitcase in hand ready to locate the bedroom and unpack for the evening straight after a much needed bathroom break.

The word that comes to mind when you look around the interior of Beth's cottage is 'abundance' - there are garden tools scattered across the hallway into the dining room, a hardwood table covered in home-canned preserves and possibly medical remedies too given the labels (for feet, for back), with very little natural light until you get to the kitchen at the back of the house. Here, thankfully, broad windows absorb the sky and ride benches that wrap around the long narrow room, folding in by way of levers and runners that collapse part of the exterior wall to allow the garden in, to partition a space where food can be prepared with kitchen resources atop soil and roots carpeting the floor.

Katita says, there are no family photos, to which I respond blankly, and then she says, I just thought maybe she had to tend to a family thing. I ask if Katita thinks that no family photos means no family, and Katita says not necessarily but maybe, she is very isolated all the way out here. Is

it possible that Beth hasn't really left at all, that she's hiding in a room somewhere and just put the note on the door because she got cold feet at the last second. This is what I say aloud and regret straight away as I can see how freaked out it makes Katita. I say that can't possibly be true, and I go through every dark room and cupboard of the house quickly, which takes all of eighty-five seconds, to prove we're alone. But what about the garden, Katita says.

We step through the partition onto flat stone pavers with a necklace of terracotta pots creating a line to follow clockwise into divisions of herbs and succulents and little bonsai-style fruit trees shelved on ladder rungs. The garden is comparatively neat given the busy cottage interior and quite compact with high walls on each of its three sides.

I'm eager to see the ocean and cliffs beyond the wall at the end of the garden and make my way towards muffled roar by carefully stepping over and between threads of beans and tomato plants. Don't break anything, Katita calls out, and I wave a hand as if to say look how I'm carefully stepping over and between threads of beans and tomato plants.

Even though the wall that I'm walking across the garden towards seems quite close, like I could reach it with two broomsticks joined end-to-end, the path there descends slightly, into almost

what could be considered a lower tier of the garden, with a banister of garden hose safely guiding me down a slope that is now clearly a fabricated tunnel of shrubs that runs beneath the upper level. A length of copper piping with little holes curves across the ceiling, likely a clever irrigation system where water from the top garden can be funnelled down here.

As I step out of the tunnel, expecting to be facing the end wall that brackets the ocean and cliff edge, I am unexpectedly standing above where I was before - not above the lower tier of the garden, but above what I thought was the upper tier, where I left Katita to find the wall. I can see her in the distance, and when I say distance I am taken aback because the scope of the garden is clearly more expansive than I first considered.

This layer I am standing on now is comprised of two grass hills that roll into a declivity and then flatten out, with a single white painted wrought iron chair and circular table set up where Beth must sit at times and have a coffee while she takes in the remarkable vista of her private oasis.

I had forgotten I was meant to be looking to see if Beth was bizarrely hiding in her own garden after putting a note on the front door saying she was clearly not here and, one would assume, never expected us to break and enter her residence and stand atop this grassy mound

without her presence. Katita is waving me over now, so I slide down and drop a good metre onto the level beneath this one, still, somehow, not quite the same level as Katita, although after taking a half dozen curving steps down and around a lime tree we are standing beside one another.

Look at this, Katita excitedly guides me to a glasshouse down a corridor of ferns I'd not seen from my previous vantage. She points to a bushy plant with dense leaves interspersed with small red fruits. Do you know what Beth has done here, and then Katita tells me, all in a rush - she's genetically grafted backhousia citriodora and solanum centrale and I say Katita, and then she says sorry, Lemon Myrtle and kutjera, bush tomato, and what Beth has done is fuse them into this hybrid plant and, wait, taste this.

Katita twists a berry off and puts it in my mouth and she says, just bite down slowly and hold it for a moment - what do you taste. I say, I taste citrus, a sweet, tart hit, and then Katita says, and now, and I say yes, now I taste a deep, sun-dried tomato undertone. It's somehow both sweet and savory, and Katita says, yes, exactly, and it's so delicious. This is wonderful. Katita heads to the kitchen to see if Beth has written down any notes or recipes where she names this new food.

Seeing Katita so enlivened by this discovery, that was really only hinted at in Beth's blog from what I understand, is affirming. It

justifies the trip out here, although as I feel the evening warmth from above start to lesson, I do wonder how we'll square this with Beth in a manner that allows Katita to include it in her project.

Another question that comes to mind is, in which room in the cottage will we sleep tonight. Are we brazen enough to sleep together in Beth's bed, pushed against the wall of a room that seemed to be both bedroom and laundry, from my brief rummage through the space to see if Beth was hiding there. It had a deep metal sink and clothes line strung near the entrance to the room, with the bed positioned beneath dark, heavy drapes. We could sleep there, if that suited Katita, depending on how transgressive she felt towards the violation evermore of privacy and intimacy we are facing off against.

Besides all that, however, I am still struck by just how lovely it is to stand here in this garden and listen to the roar beyond the walls, which I know thankfully now I will never reach, and the warmth that, while fading, is still so pleasant and exotic in a way that sunlight from different positions on the earth always feels most spontaneously foreign.

As I wander down yet another pathway to some indeterminate position I snap off a few stray twigs and jostle them in my grip before sliding a few between by button holes and even one behind

my left ear. I take more as I'm walking, pruning dead offshoots really, although some green leaves remain as I fold the sticks and branches into my apparel, into my hair, through my belt buckle and down the front of my legs like a scarecrow.

I look around and can see, across the rise and fall of the garden, Katita smiling at me. She looks at what is in her hands, light silvery-green ovals of velvet leaf, and deposits them on the side of her head, through her hair, to look somewhat like cat ears. She takes some lavender stalks from a pot nearby and holds them on her upper-lip like whiskers as she meows and pretends to paw the air in front of her. We both laugh and look around for more resources to work with.

As we play, it occurs to me that perhaps if we camouflage ourselves well enough - if I become a tree and my wife becomes a cat - we could very likely just stay here in Beth's private garden forever. I picture her walking through her kitchen, tired from her trip to wherever, grateful to be finally be home again amongst all this, and what would she think of just one more tree amongst the many scattered haphazardly here and there. Really, what would she think too of a garden cat, come in from the plains most likely, chasing a field mouse across the high wall and now just basking on the pavers. Surely animals must come and go from time to time, new seeds grow where nothing may or may not have otherwise been. And what's

more, I like standing still, I'm sure I could maintain the posture for quite some time, especially on a nice day, and Katita has always liked milk and biscuits. We might honestly be on to a winner here.

What if, to help my stability standing in this grove, I add some brick footings to my feet and scaffold a wooden brace to my legs. There are pine sleepers nearby that are perfect for the job, and as I arrange them and look up to see how feline Katita has become, I'm surprised to see her arms covered not in fur but feathers.

Katita presses the fluffy head clumps of Pampas grass across one arm with something resembling sea holly across the other, with a long brown seed pod on her nose as a beak, although the cat elements remain too, the ears, the whiskers, and she is definitely purring, almost into a mew I guess as she calls out to me to see her wings spread, revealing tufts of soft tummy hair blowing in the dusklight, her cat-bird form near complete.

I'm encouraged to keep building up the wood and brickwork here into my construction, a tree-house I'm figuring now, although even as this comes to be I wonder about other possibilities. The sound of glasses clinking together in some distant memory of celebratory cheers floats across the garden as I see that Katita has added some glass tiles on strings to her arrangement, becoming who

knows what, a cat-bird-wind chime or a kinetic illusory pendant twirling behind the glasshouse, into the glasshouse really, reflecting magnificently against the geometry.

Making my way over to her, my brick footings and wooden legs stepping like stilts in long arcing gestures, the sort I would use to walk across evening telegraph wires from one state to the next if given half the chance, I pick up fruit along the way as I spike, kebab style, fallen apples along the path that snakes through history towards where Katita is still refracting in her sanctuary, as her sanctuary, where I find her and hold her in the cadence of my architecture and my foliage. In this position we are not the first man and woman to come together, beneath the void of no sun, to realise an outpouring of singularities and dualities across the land, but rather I say to Katita, as she says to me, what if we dance a while, divide into some infinite generative multiplicity that knows no end - so what then, if the garden joins us (Katita laughs, it already has, idiot), nature never able to be passive even if it tried.

And who knows, say we maintain infinity until it grows dark, and then we tidy up a bit, put the glass and brickwork and leaves back, somewhat, and we make our way inside and turn the lights on. I'm happy to sleep in Beth's bed tonight, without concern, and if Katita isn't sure, after we make dinner here (all those canned

preserves in the hallway, so many options), we can just place cushions on the floor perhaps. Although I can't see that working, it's so dusty down there - no, the bed is the best option. When Beth returns in the morning to see us sleeping there, all of humanity gathered in one bed, it'll be like she never left.

The Wind Bucket

A small boy dressed in grey
walks into the wind with a yellow bucket.

He is unsteady on his feet as he is
only a few months having learned the posture.

The wind torrents with prestorm fervour
and the boy swings his arms and yells
as his bucket collects up the air.

With repeated shouts the boy looks into
the sky and causes me to wonder
whether he is chastising the wind or joining it
in its revelry, urging it to roar on.

But then the bucket hangs still beside
the little legs of the boy as the air
goes quiet, perhaps answering his yells

by whispering that it will not be commanded
to blow by this young master
nor will it be contained by his
yellow wind bucket.

A Billiard Table with Five Balls and Twelve Cues

Late last decade, I found myself sitting in the foyer of the Shanghai Sunshine Rehabilitation Centre with a colleague from Orange and Leif, a man in his fifties, one of the organisers of the United Nations conference we were attending. Leif had dedicated his life to the conference theme - predictive algorithms and political game theory. I was in my twenties and just starting to make a name for myself academically in the same field when Leif, sitting deep in a plastic lawn chair on saffron vinyl flooring, told the two of us a story that is, today, giving me pause. It relates to a decision about my life's direction and, considering that you might square up against a similar situation, I will recount, in full, Leif's story.

It takes place thirty years ago. Leif was coming up on his fifth wedding anniversary, which, he said, equated to almost as many days (five) that he and his wife, Katita, had spent together that year. That wouldn't have been much of a claim if it were early January, but this was late September. Leif and Katita travelled constantly, separately, attending conferences worldwide, presenting papers, delivering keynotes, chairing sessions. Their fields of expertise were not wholly

foreign to one another, but they rarely ended up in the same place. An apartment they owned in London was permanently occupied by graduate students for low rent. By good fortune and strategic scheduling, however, they were both able to secure spots on the same agenda for a conference off the coast of what was, at the time, West Shanbudia.

Not long after they arrived - lanyards and name tags were still being handed out - the delegates were made aware of civil unrest in the north and told that the situation was being closely monitored. An hour later, everyone was ushered by security into taxis and onto the back of motorbikes as the upheaval was essentially knocking on the door. Within minutes, an assembly of academics, Leif and Katita among them, had been dropped off at a marina where a seaplane began to ferry people to a nearby fishing island that would act as a safe house until the violence dissipated or other travel plans could be coordinated.

Leif described the island as one of those places that almost anybody would label, quote, a little slice of paradise/heaven, unquote. The thing is, it wasn't a tourist destination, although today it would be, or possibly already is. At the time, it was simply home to a hundred locals, mainly those in the fishing trade, which became apparent as the new arrivals found there were no hotels on the island. The UN rapidly arranged for a schoolhouse

to contain everybody. Most were assigned classrooms to share, with allowances for distribution of gender and age – again, the idea of how long everyone would be staying here was unknown – but Leif and Katita, being one of the only couples present, were shown to what was essentially a sports storage cupboard, just big enough for a gym mat that would be their mattress for the night.

As utopian as the island looked (taking in a panorama in any direction revealed lush green hillsides creasing into diamond sparkle seas necklacing pastel-dusted shacks with colourful blinking flags everywhere), it bore with it the most tremendous heat that threatened to render faint the entire delegation. It seemed counterintuitive to Leif that the island would be hotter than the mainland, but something about the topography trapped the heat like nothing else. He and Katita dropped their bags in their storage cupboard/room and took a walk to find relief.

By the time they found a supermarket with – halleluiah – refrigerators they could loiter near, they were almost delirious with laughter. Whether it was the heat or the shock of the situation or, as Leif would later decide, the ecstatic feeling of being airdropped so rapidly into what seemed the most oasis-like of places, it was taking its effect. And, importantly, Leif and Katita were together for the first time in how many months. They were

hand in sweaty hand during this dreamlike fiasco as violence swelled within audible range across the bay.

Between the refrigerators and the toiletries at the back of the store there was, of all things, a pinball machine. It showed a couple playing tennis on the backlit art. Katita popped a coin in the machine and a ball clanged against the plunger. Now, this might sound like an unnecessary salacious detail or a baseline product of male-gaze fantasy, but Leif then told us how Katita casually took off her top as she played her game of pinball and how he looked at her standing there in her tan slacks and black bra and was struck, and he knows how this sounds, as if by some cosmic revelation. He thought - this is my wife. And, then - why is this not our everyday? Why the itinerary of lonely hotels, single plate breakfast buffets of dull eggs and pastries, the hollow applause for one professor after another delivering lectures cribbed from their doctoral students? At this moment, with Katita already twenty thousand points in with three balls remaining, Leif never wanted to leave the island.

Bottles of water in hand, they return to their room where Katita rests, fanning herself with copies of their prepared remarks for the conference, while Leif heads back out for a wander. He heads towards the coast where fishermen have congregated. They get chatting,

and they ask him what he does for work. He says that he writes formulas to predict social and political trends, and one of the fishermen gestures towards the mainland and says, so how'd you go with predicting that, and everybody, Leif included, has a good laugh.

They invite Leif to a party they're holding tonight on the beach, a welcome to the visitors. Leif says he has nothing to bring, and they laugh again. They say not to worry, we love to drink and eat and have plenty of everything, just enjoy yourself. It all sounds like such a stereotype of the overly generous and hospitable nature of those who live simply and within their modest means, but honestly, the way Leif described it was like the whole place was a fulfilment of this kind of trope in the best possible way.

On returning to the hotel room, Katita is pensive. She's holding Leif's conference paper, the keynote he would have been presenting pretty much right then, at that same hour, had events tracked differently. He asks what's wrong, and she says his algorithms are all wrong. Leif had made some serious miscalculations. She points the errors out to him, and he regards them seriously, so seriously that he cannot stop a grin from stretching wide across his face. He places the papers down on the bed and hugs Katita tight. Thank you, he says. This is such a gift. And, of course, he means it, not just, or at least not really,

because he's relieved he didn't present such drastically inaccurate information at a conference of his peers, but rather because this is the sign he has been looking for that he is finished with his former life. Done with academia, done with patterns and politics. No more algorithms. Better living without geometry.

At dusk, Leif and Katita arrive at the party and start revelling. Most delegates are there with around fifty or sixty island residents, all told around a hundred folks milling around, and drinks are flowing. Within an hour, the only thing more lubricated than everyone's social inhibitions were the sweat-soaked clothes of the delegates, who were prepared for air-conditioned rooms and not this intense tropical heat.

The fisherman who ribbed Leif earlier that afternoon passes around plates of calamari and rice when he notices one of the delegates looking up at a bird perched on a canopy, singing a bright tune. Jerdon's Babbler, the fisherman says, and the delegate says, do they always sing at this time of day, and the fisherman says no, but this one does. He was born upside down, on the middle of the ocean floor. He is unique. Everyone laughs at this, and then someone, one of the delegates, says how it is impossible for people to imitate bird songs. They say someone once tricked attendees at an ethnomusicology conference by whistling into a tape recorder and speeding it up, pretending it

was a bird. Someone else, another delegate, says that Mozart had a pet starling that inspired him to write the melody for the last movement of his seventeenth piano concerto.

The fisherman laughs, I wish I could do that, listen to this bird and write an excellent piece of music, when Leif pipes up, feeling a bit caustic, like he wants to take some of the stuffing out of the air, and he proclaims loudly that Mozart never really liked music, that he just kept on doing it because of his oppressive childhood, and that it didn't even pay well, he pretty much died in poverty. Leif stands up and laughs, almost definitely drunk, and says that after Mozart died, they found pretty much no possessions in his apartment, just a scrap of the requiem he had been working on, which had been jammed under the table leg of the only piece of furniture in the apartment – a billiard table with five balls and twelve cues.

Leif and Katita leave not long after and walk along the beach. The moon took up most of the sky, infusing long ocean waves with chalk dust turned milk. Don't let me leave here, Leif tells Katita. And don't you go, either. He says, we're home, we're home, and Katita says, you're drunk, you're drunk, and Leif says, yes, but still.

By the time morning comes around, Leif isn't sure if they've been walking all night or if they've just returned to the same spot after

presumably fading to black in the storage room of the schoolhouse. Either way, he and Katita are walking hand in hand up the coast towards where Leif met the fishermen yesterday. They are there again, no doubt since early, given the number of fish they already have in their immense wooden tub mounted on what looks like a security door with skateboard wheels.

Katita looks in and says something about what a haul they have there, and the fishermen laugh and agree, always laughing, always good-natured. Leif pokes his head above the tub and sees the fish, perhaps thirty or forty mullet, swimming over and around each other. He notices that if a mullet flicks its tail upwards, out of the water, it means it is going to dive to the bottom of the tub, which will lead to three or four surrounding fish to expand their nares and dart counter-clockwise, always the same direction, in near-rhythmic cycles. He notes too how the smaller fish are less likely by at least one standard deviation to congregate near those that dive.

Leif looks up and sees that Katita is watching him with an expression somewhere between sorrow and grace. She smiles and turns away. Someone from the street is calling out to them, something about getting ready to board the seaplane back to the mainland. Now, if you ask Leif, he'll swear that he doesn't remember getting on a flight out of there, but then there he was,

telling my colleague from Orange and me this story in the foyer of the Shanghai Sunshine Rehabilitation Centre, only hours after having given a rousing presentation on the impact of machine learning properties on predictive voting trends, so you know, he didn't swim back to the mainland, did he. As for me, there is a, quote-unquote, seaplane waiting to take me somewhere, back to what I've always known, but for the life of me, please - I want it to stay grounded.

Carnival

The speaker on the oval
sounds like it really only
fits, say, a pasta bowl of
sound through its cone,
yet the voice is trying to
push through a bathtub
of intense verbal growl,
yelling in peak distortion,
not sound wave so much
as a brick of blunt noise.

It is carnival day, teenage
athletics, the whole school
is there, well near enough,
he's decided to stick here
on the basketball court in
audible range of the oval,
just a croquet court for the
elderly between them, he
has watched a few games
where the old timers take

their earned time striking
balls across the green like
Alice in Wonderland, 1951
original animation on VHS,
he knows because of the

scanlines, horizontal like
he wants to be, streamed
to mobile with AirPods in,
floating in the background
same playlist playing now

to block out the sound of
school spirit, not for him,
who cares, look at where
he is beneath Winter sun,
the courts here pushing a
trolly ferrying Louise and
Sally, wouldn't be caught
dead at sport, twin noodle
legs slung over the bars,
teak hair ribboning as he

swings the shopping trolly
in a broad arc, white teeth
parted as hiemal air phases
around them in a wash of
outsider celebration. Later
they'll huddle beneath the
lighthouse by the harbour
coated in abundant silence,
near enough, only crackle
from the fire and the sticks.

Postseasonal

The invitation came through for the two of them to be interviewed on the radio that evening around half nine at the rural dockside station on the other side of Port Rhombus a solid half day drive from town where they drew blinds on their second floor apartment drank juice and coffee packed the station wagon with art supplies and food and set off in partial homage to how lovers Julio Cortázar and Carol Dunlop travelled up the Paris-Marseilles freeway in a rogue travelogue.

In contrast to how those two created fantasy out of dull service station parking lots and featureless road stops the focus for our town couple was how they collaborated on artworks (she painted he talked) depicting landscapes from early nineteen eighties video games that had created such an impression on their young minds that they were to recurrently seek these same geographies out forever more hence this trip would provide another time to find and paint these sites en plein air.

Exiting the city via the east end past pastel lemon hotel facade down King and Hunter children riding mechanical mega beasts think oversized animatronic wombat bilby platypus etc as part of a festival in Civic Park streamers confetti turn right at the interchange through Wickham stop at the lights see an elderly man in eggshell cotton at a wooden bench outside a pub drinking beer with a care robot clinking glasses the diesel powered humanoid tin can raising a pint in sunshine cheers.

At Bobs Farm they take a leg stretch beside a spruce windbreak and look at their picnic stash take an apricot a breadroll and soak up the shadows of the foliage wall listen to the chirping of a sparrow and then a wet sound tiny feathers shaking behind the trees an inground pool is nestled within a necklace of green no house just a utility shed with terracotta paving and a white diving board at knee height the pool so clear and crisp but not the object of an artwork today as it references nothing.

The first painting will be a little ways up the road at a point where the road turns in a gentle arc like a thumb in repose with mountainous clouds rising from the surface of the nail palm trees along the metacarpal and horizontal infinities of sand along the scan lines of cathode ray tube displays bleeding dust into high midday blue think Outrun and Virtua Racer the guy here can remember playing it in a cinema arcade and feeling a sense of internal motion never felt before or since.

Some ways towards Karuah they spot a meadow that closely resembles the playing field in Space Harrier and so many other titles from the period with checkerboard mown quadrants of shamrock pistachio crocodile green with distant orchid mountains just the feeling of walking across these fields take away the action the plot just leave the gentle trajectory onward as Beckett would say not on my way anywhere but simply on my way which she depicts and rests flat on the back seat to dry.

Hitting city streets that pull off beside a concrete crater the width of short term memory like an inverted dome perhaps the inversion of Bernhard's cone no it's just a skate bowl yet its silence manifests a monumental spiritual brutalism that she paints of course she does while he says this clearly means something to us yet eighties video games had not quite worked out how to romanticise the exploration of empty urban landscapes outside of say the uninhabited California Games.

Finding the radio station is easy it has a roadhouse with two rooms astride a gravel sweep at its back where they unpack a few basics the sun a glob of backlit sap let bulb within into a Shell service station courtyard for food an eatery opposite end to the cash register near the fuel injectors and air fresheners but look each booth has a full size plastic mascot a creature with a massive hamburger head and sesame seed hair and onion eyes with its tube arm outstretched ready to cradle you.

The couple pass on this uncanny setup and find instead a food van half a block down that sells kebabs and bao and what have you but here is the kicker it has a mounted television with Mario Kart hooked up beside the serving window where you can get a race in while the fryer dips sure wipe off the sauce the grease from the previous competitor but then you are off around the track they gesture to each other look at those trees the sky where the sand ebbs beneath salt water paradise pixels.

Just after nine and the couple get a call from the radio station the host has called in sick at the last minute but the producer on the line is ready and really it is an open opportunity to just come in and talk about anything or play tunes or whatever but the couple they aren't so sure when they get in there they are not feeling the vibe what about just cue up a few songs for the hour and they find a MIDI file of Jesu Joy Of Man's Desiring on the station computer and ask if that can be played on repeat.

Outside the couple sit on white plastic lawn chairs in the dust patio and look over the binary pointillism white yellow dot glow of valley city buildings with decimal motorways mauve illumination of neighbouring countries star systems ontologies better living through geometry he is about to talk about the ending of the first Streets of Rage game but holds off lest Bach be interrupted and she does not mention how this is the final chorale from the cantata Hearts and Mouth and Deed and Life.

They sleep and wake up and wander by the dock the lighthouse an artificial father figure to the sun beckoning it rise up before their morning embrace corduroy on wool palm on auburn flow to nape a stretch a yawn a dragging cage across damp slope filled with orange roughy and fellowfin tuna with a smell that references a morning even earlier than this some dark tidal drifting in praise of a quiet slowing of time they close up the boot of the wagon and skirt the mangroves on the motorway.

Near Tea Gardens a swimming pool unoccupied not dissimilar to the one spotted yesterday near Bobs Farm this one part of a private country club of some description unfenced on this side against the access road heat rising from the asphalt becoming quite a hot day what about a dip not here look at the water and they crouch the way it undulates in unbroken parabolic lines no edges but it does blink in little mounds from shadow off to sky mirror on it looks simulated beyond what nature renders.

Passing through a town another town more streets buildings they wonder what game this might be the obvious one comes to mind SimCity played in primary school computer classes nobody quite working out the economic subtleties which call to mind these suburbs are not unlike spreadsheet rows and columns she remembers an Excel artist creating stunning cherry blossom landscapes within the data cells he points at a logarithmic table garage door beach house she shells data sells.

Pastoralism now inland coast turned causeway they pass a Train Simulator en route to a Farming Simulator paddock bordering a Factory simulation game wherein a simulation simulator loads a simulacra model of what pastoral fields used to look like not the sort from video game landscapes that brought them here to paint and create but perhaps the idea the game designer had of what a nice meadow would look like a childhood memory where the copy is the original sacrament.

A river laps over a tumble of stones within view of a roadside pause where our couple tread out and float cheeks to the horizon knees to the mesophere and then she turns and says this is not a pool and he agrees this is not a pool this is not a reference sure perhaps a movie here or there with a dip in a river a book a poem a Norman Rockwell painting shirt hung on a hanger attached to a stonewall a handkerchief with spectacles atop or a Norman Lindsay river nymph phantasm.

Sundown across the corridor home they wonder if they are just a couple of thirty something retrobates at heart stuck looking backwards caught up in nostalgorithms feeding on playlists of memories that do not seem to be their recollections alone rather a collective sense of if you remember this you will love this like how the new generation of Simpsons writers tried to write jokes like those they grew up on but they used a copier belonging to Warhol and the punchlines just faded away.

Upstairs at their second floor apartment double hung white wooden frames catching last light the poseable mannequin spirit bottle with daisy in on the windowsill looking at the old rail line where a carpet of grass is rediscovering sugar they look at a game to play tonight dystopian cyberpunk or pastoral Aesop animal fables the feedback loop synthesising refractions of economic big data no turn away all civilisations graduate towards ordered figures so choose entropy as yet unimagined.

Arborealish

From a hilltop in Walcha

Most of the view is treetop,
tufts of olive green and umber
folding light into vast creases
of ever fading mountainside,
over exposed in the sunrise.

The trees near you do not
resemble those in view, paper
bark splintered fractals cast
in never changing postures,
grey to their timeless roots.

In the valley they resemble
pines, pencil forest soldiers
lined in wave formation, but
this transition is illusion, the
trees here are all the same,

save for a clearing in the north
where intersecting meadows
nestle their parabolic curves
into a geometry of wandering
pale gold, where a rusty power

pole simulates the life to come.

Prompt

A radio play for two voices.

WOMAN:
It starts with traffic.

MAN:
On the stage.

WOMAN:
All the adults are leaving the city.

MAN:
On the stage. This is theatre.

WOMAN:
The children are non-verbal.

MAN:
Non-verbal or pre-verbal.

WOMAN:
What's the difference?

MAN:
They won't have any lines.
That's what you're saying.

WOMAN:
The children have no lines.

MAN:
And when you say traffic.

WOMAN:
It isn't just cars.

MAN:
Of course not.

WOMAN:
I'm reading buses, coaches, trains, airport shuttles.

MAN:
Why not blimps, hot air balloons, parasails.

WOMAN:
The sky is never described.

MAN:
No clouds, no descriptions of light. A blank on all atmospheric conditions. The sky is of no importance, this is what you're saying.

WOMAN:
So far as I have read.

MAN:
And you have not read the whole thing.

WOMAN:
You know this, the play has just been handed to us.

MAN:
To you.

WOMAN:
To us.

MAN:
The traffic leaving the city, we show this how. Painted curtains, cardboard silhouettes. Don't tell me smoke machines. What city is being described, are we talking a metropolis or a regional centre?

WOMAN:
There is a building.

MAN:
Oh it really is a city. A building, how inventive. I can practically smell a Nobel Prize being awarded for this one. A profound meditation on the lost innocence of human subjectivity, wrought out of prose that enlivens the dignity of -

WOMAN:
The sky is described.

MAN:
Just when I thought all hope was lost.

WOMAN:
Toffee.

MAN:
Excuse me.

WOMAN:
The sky is toffee-toned.

MAN:
I'm leaving. I'll see you around.

WOMAN:
It's mid-morning. The children are outside, beneath the toffee-toned sky, balancing on state-built brickwork walls, crawling along a quarter of grass with a non-incidental incline.

MAN:
How young are the children?

WOMAN:
Notes say no older than four.

MAN:
And they are all alone in the city because the adults have abandoned them.

WOMAN:
It was mid-morning that captured you, wasn't it.
You could see the sky.

MAN:
Enough about the bloody sky. Go on.

WOMAN:
You know, blood on a glass panel with light
shining through would approach the tone of sky
toffee.

MAN:
Are you ready to be serious?

WOMAN:
The building is an aviary. It is described in terms
of metabolic brutalism.

MAN:
Now I'm getting angry. Before I was aghast,
but that's not enough anymore.

WOMAN:
There is mention of radiolaria, of parametric
designs that should play on the law of ruins.

MAN:
Albert Speer. Play how.

WOMAN:
The superstructure that comprises the aviary will disintegrate during the course of the play.

MAN:
Disintegrate. Turn to dust. I'll phone the health and safety office and alert them that air filtration masks should be supplied to all theatre attendees. You ring the prop department and tell them that we'll require one incongruous building borne out of the recesses of an eccentric's mind that will disintegrate on command. Much like how his talent clearly disintegrated across the decades.

WOMAN:
Do you really believe that?

MAN:
Well come on. Radiolaria. Metabolic brutalism.

WOMAN:
Remember it is mid-morning.

MAN:
Listen, I wouldn't be here if I didn't think there was something real at the heart of this.

WOMAN:
The recovered masterwork, mentioned in the journals of how many contemporaries over the

years, how many interviews where the question was raised. Compiled from his final hard drive, a miracle of data restoration. His estate chose us.

MAN:
How can we be sure the data wasn't subtly
corrupted? Lost in translation,
a zero instead of a one.

WOMAN:
The disintegrated splinters of the aviary are to be extracted through air conditioned ventilation.

MAN:
The particles will rise.

WOMAN:
A tower of light. Cyclonic. We could do this.

MAN:
Dust, not light. I know what you're going to say,
but let's remember this is disintegration,
not the reverse.

WOMAN:
Does this relate to a biographical detail that I'm forgetting? One of his earlier works?

MAN:
The walks he took with his mother, when his father

took him to a coastal ridge and said jump.

WOMAN:
The remark his mother made on the most
referenced of those walks, his father's embrace
when he swam back to shore.

MAN:
What else?

WOMAN:
What else what?

MAN:
The next prompt. I'm seeing infants climbing on
state-built brickwork, an exodus of adults via
arterial roadways, parametric aviaries that
crumble northward. Tell me about the birds.

WOMAN:
You can imagine.

MAN:
You'll tell me if I get it wrong.

WOMAN:
The children save the birds. There is a diagram.

MAN:
Of how the stork narrative is reversed.

WOMAN:
An arrow circles back. The birds delivered the children and then, and now, as you can imagine.

MAN:
Fill in the blanks for me.

WOMAN:
What's the point?

MAN:
No don't give up on me now. Come on, I'm invested. You said mid-morning, I asked about the age of the children. Now we're dancing.

WOMAN:
An arrow circles back on dance steps. Close the left foot to the right. Step to the right and back in line with the midsection of the aviary. The children take the birds onto their backs. Cross the left foot over the right. The non-incidental incline of the grass allows the children to be funnelled away from the audience.

MAN:
Leaving a void, although not completely, we see the brick wall, the grass. I would say the sky but now I think of Goya's dog, El Perro.

WOMAN:
It is not a void if we want something from it.

MAN:
Nobody ever talks about the silhouette hovering above the dog, coming out of the non-incidental incline, looking down slope. It looks to me as if Goya's shadow was pressed into the wall there, gazing at his painted canine with infinite love.

WOMAN:
It is a stain, the result of extracting the work from the walls of his putrid cottage, this is well known. The final prompt is that the grass should shimmer and the wall should lower.

MAN:
What are the specifics?

WOMAN:
Grass shimmer, ambient blade ripple render, subterranean fold pressure, wall immersion.

MAN:
The grass turns to water and the brick wall descends like the lowering of a floodgate. Something is rising from beneath. There is a growth, a new force emerging.
What's the next prompt?

WOMAN:
That was the last one.

MAN:
There's more. Look again, there's always something more. You missed the sky at the beginning, take another look.

WOMAN:
I turn the page over and back again. There is nothing more.

MAN:
Please.

WOMAN:
I'm tired.

MAN:
Can you please check again?

WOMAN:
I check again.

MAN:
What do you find?

WOMAN:
I want to say nothing.

MAN:
And yet.

WOMAN:
What if a pipeline rises?

MAN:
Don't start with what if, please.

WOMAN:
A pipeline rises.

MAN:
Something for the adults to return to.

WOMAN:
Scaffolding emerges.

MAN:
Thank you, honestly.

WOMAN:
Broad metal pipeline snakes from shimmer,
matrices of steel interpolate, volleyed by air from
north vents.

MAN:
The air conditioning, it's reverse cycle.

WOMAN:
Warbling of scaffold creates resonance akin loose vertical powerlines, singing. Are you crying?

Selector

A radio play for two voices.

MAN:
Start with a simple two note melody.
Two notes close together. One note steps down lightly to the next.

SOFTWARE:
D 3 to C 3.

MAN:
The first note should be slightly shorter than the second.

SOFTWARE:
D 3 is a quaver and C 3 is a crotchet.

MAN:
Pause there. Think someone is at the door.
[silence]
Resume. Thought I heard knocking.

SOFTWARE:
Drum rhythm added.

MAN:
What. No I said knocking at the door.

SOFTWARE:
Wooden sound source.

MAN:
Oh for goodness. Well play it back then.
Wait. First a sound source for the melody.
Select piano.

SOFTWARE:
Piano for D 3 to C 3.

MAN:
Wood will not work for the rhythm.
Select low cello bass notes. C 1. Crotchets.

SOFTWARE:
Cello C 1 crotchets.

MAN:
Think those marching lines of Haydn.
Boom boom boom boom.
Make you think of some mythological giant.
Footsteps pacing a dry field.

SOFTWARE:
Tempo 100 beats per minute.

MAN:
Faster than that. Slightly though.
Think symphony number one hundred and four.
Andante.

SOFTWARE:
Tempo 105 beats per minute.

MAN:
Symphony one hundred and four.
One hundred and five beats per minute.
Haydn wrote one hundred
and six symphonies in total.
There are, however, two bonus symphonies.
Symphony A and Symphony B.
Sympathy for the day. Sympathy for thee.
I digress. Ignore just spoken.
Add strings to the melody.

SOFTWARE:
Two violins and one viola with piano melody.

MAN:
Now spread the tones.
Piano tonic, violins at three and four, viola seven.
Cello bass remains the same.
Play back.

SOFTWARE:
[music]

MAN:
Good. Now syncopate the cello bass.
Not syncopate, undo.
It should pizzicato in unison with the melody.
Quaver crotchet, quaver crotchet.

SOFTWARE:
Cello C 1 is a quaver and C 1 is a crotchet.

MAN:
Play back.

SOFTWARE:
[music]

MAN:
Better. Too plain, though.
I want to say, too musical.
How about add a sound.
Field recording library. Add what.
Vinyl static, the pops of a dusty record.

SOFTWARE:
Added vinyl ambience.

MAN:
But that isn't quite right, is it?
Say a crumble of something.
The powder of rocks
being pressed lightly underfoot.
Ground by plastic footwear.
I want to say gumboots.
I want to say the inverse
of a crumble of something.
The obvious answer is raindrops but that's wrong.
I can hear a heat. Let's skip this for now. Undo.

SOFTWARE:
Vinyl ambience removed.
Piccolo sequence added D6 semibreve.

MAN:
Wait, what? Oh the kettle.
You silly thing.
That's just the kettle whistling in the kitchen.
You're so sensitive since the upgrade.
Come on then, play back, let's hear it.

SOFTWARE:
[music]

MAN:
That's very good.
Still too musical, but it's getting there.
I have a sound in my head,
what can you do with this.
[mouth sounds, tongue tapping roof of mouth]
There is a descriptor I can't quite - fizzle!
Add a bed of fizzle of the track.

SOFTWARE:
Field recording hot stove cooking added.

MAN:
Christ yes that's exactly it. How do you do that?
A hot stove and a kettle whistling. Bloody hell.
I want to say play back but not yet. The melody.

Can we, I want to say
compress the piano and strings.
Push them together, create a composite sound.
Is that possible in this version?

SOFTWARE:
Morph effect applied to piano, violins and viola.
Rendering.

MAN:
Okay, now while they're rendering,
let's work on the cello.
Isolate that layer and play back.

SOFTWARE:
[music]

MAN:
It needs to be lower. I want to say barometric.
I want to say sonar.
The pizzicato of a cello that just rings out.
Add subterranean reverb, lower an octave.
Play back.

SOFTWARE:
[music]

MAN:
Slow down, we're not imitating Hayden anymore.
Largo. Or nearly largo. Use your intuition.

What would you do? I'll follow your lead.

SOFTWARE:
Cello removed.
Field recording heartbeat added.

MAN:
Thank you for not making me say it.

SOFTWARE:
Rendering finished.

MAN:
Play back.

SOFTWARE:
[music]

MAN:
[pause]
Play back again.

SOFTWARE:
[music]

MAN:
[pause]
Formant the melody. You know what I mean.
Vowel the end of each note.
Open cut off, close resonance.

Play back. No - wait.
First pianissimo. Same pace as heartbeat.
What am I trying to say. A plosive.
This should commence the sequence.
Beneath whistle of kettle,
above bed of kitchen fizzle.
Both within and without the heartbeat, somehow.
Sustain tail of second note. Part the teeth, the lips.
I'm looking up but without eyes. I am all ears.
Play back.

SOFTWARE:
Peter.

MAN:
Mother.

Obfuscation

Part 1

*In which The Fighter, walking through a sun shower in Singapore, seeks shelter by heading into Raffles Bar. By chance he finds his old friend The Failure there. They discuss a recently published research paper on *data obfuscation and decide to travel to Shenzhen in order to create a biohack device that can implement the theoretical results of this paper into the physical body.*

**http://trackmenot.io/resources/trackmenot2009.pdf*

So what the raindrops are halogen
or magnesium in glowlight and The
Fighter, of course, only one without
an umbrella, and yet what matter
the straw hat the white linen shirt
drenched one minute now steaming
not quite dry but surely near enough
to snap the barbs Time's Arrow's head.

Past The Cathay the cinematic air still
filled with sundrop cylinders fizzling
as they hit feetfallen avenue that The
Fighter, bless him, past his prime, soft
gutted shoulders hunched yes but broad
enough to still do what sky imbues him
with - an ever present warning signal
posture ready to return the rocket flare.

Past The Cathay on Fat Boy's Burgers
say burger red the colour of fascination
of course, of course, could throw these
wet clothes into the bin at shops, The
Fighter buy a new shirt robot cat future
proof of the sudden downpour for later
regaling to who - one who peels brown
autumn shells from flowers, puts in ears.

The rain on the tiles near the outdoor
bar in Raffles make the tiles look wet,
like really wet, like each tile were a
brown expressionist painting of great
wetness with acrylic emulsion polymers
nowhere near dry and say who knows
how The Fighter got here from the street,
from bend of bay through horticultured

archway, possibly, who can say, except
perhaps the one he spots sitting there
in the rain - my old friend, of all places,
the synchronicity of it - The Failure.
Absorbed in the televisual news, he is
leaning on the wet bar with raindrops
mingling in nestled sea of bourbon. Lad,
it is not that I cannot process it all, say

he turns to The Fighter, but rather it
is not enough no am not after censor
nor longform perspectivism or peace
but something I can okay listen to this
Howe & Nissenbaum two oh oh nine
regarding obfuscation even just the
word fills me with hold on my lips are
dry like tiles that never knew the rain.

A mind that can absorb so much and yet
use so little, The Fighter met The Failure
in his neatly cubed backyard in Wee Waa,
this is going back say a decade plus, say
doubleback and sponsor the pastwise, say
The Fighter as story being told by The
Failure, every narrative a diary of youth
being told to the ever-youth in our head.

I went a'walking the other day and heard
a new voice behind my eyes, perhaps
the third evolution of tenor and gradient,
of bend and volley, that my headwords
have resounded since preverbal longing
hold up The Failure smacks the bar thus
teaching glisten to pike, to pirouette, oh
you think so much and wander so little

my fighter now punch your way towards
train station, Adlestrop, no I mean the
paddle pop at the mass rapid transit stand,
we should blockchain to Shenzhen for
biohack components, I foresee a subskin
flat breadboard to prototype a filter that
pollutes all incoming news of the world,
yes lad, views o' the pearled nihilistening.

Part 2

In which recent months in the life of The Fighter are recounted, with regards to his loss in a boxing match on the beach, how he has become a target for youths wanting to make a name for themselves, and how he has turned to space tourism and living with a Spanish dub music collective in the shadow of his loss, avoiding the life he once lived.

It is possible he should have allowed
the blood poisoning from his tooth
to swallow him after the knock taken
in the beachside ring back six months
that afternoon when the sandscape
melted in waves of grainy lava phasing
see Les Darcy at Balmoral, see how
Red and Gold Sunset by Whistler was

a mirror unto the slides of diagnostic
hemoglobin observed in the seaside
maternity hospital, see the young cad
in Woolworths sizing up The Fighter
and being egged on by mates and and
wham he receives The Fighter in his
toffee toned raincoat with enough full
physical force to turn the contenders

muscle tendons into yeast, crushed ye
entropically into the bakery shelves,
thy mass now the bread of the universe
that The Failure would later say must
be broken off and shared unto itself like
trees too far gone with sending signals
of biological risk to one another so now
all dialogue is via transplanted limbs.

Beyond the sealed lid of the world The
Fighter took his fourth space tourist jaunt
last week so the next trip is half price. As
Presley sang in Clambake, look for the
brightest lights in town to see the abyss
embrace its gown, as Bernard sang on
occasion of the first heart transplant, the
original has gone missing but I've a spare.

When The Fighter was oh at age young
people are when they start manipulating
subterranean engines jaunt aire in shafts
of choral resonance, was acutely aware
whilst toting a wooden staff that up there
beyond the mostly sealed lid, in waiting,
dressed in magnesium white, a weapon
with his name on it, aimed at him, always.

Call it fate call it Word he knows they get
one shot at him and he one back at them,
from A to B parabola to C, shoot and see,
fill your gold shoes with funerals and let
it be, remind me whom history will erase
time after time with multi pass overwrites.
According to The Failure, The Fighter is
quote all that, he is unbloodytouchable.

But if this is the case then why the loss
in the ring on the beach the other arvo,
not within mirror view for him this year
living on earth seaside with Agua Viva,
in their recording studio van producing
dub dancehall variations with casiotone
and echo stompbox, transmitted arterial
through city veins by a dish on the roof.

He stumbled up to them one heatstroke
afternoon beachscape dripping against
pedestrian skyline, The Fighter singing
in this lowing guttural mumble vibe that
just seemed to work, we found the bass
thus spake the orphan bandmates, but
why you here, go home be a family man,
The Fighter more like The Volaverunt eh,

we hear your wife is calientes, we saw a
print that Baudelaire implored his friend
to buy from Goya's son, Duchess of Alba,
supersize purple bow on waist, necklace,
big copper bell seated immensely in her
ketchup hair, star salted peregrine eyes,
and you were there too, shaggy whiskers,
damaged teeth sunk in parish beachballs.

Part 3

In which The Fighter and The Failure catch the bullet train from Singapore to Shenzhen in order to meet Cy, a biohacker with a penchant for pretty and eccentric gadgets. They discuss their intention to create an obfuscation device that would overclock the amount of incoming news to the brain in order to scramble any attempt to give order to it, but Cy wonders if they might not be better considering the notion of Sideways Music (Markosian, N. (2020). Sideways music. *Analysis, 80*(1), 51–59.).

Sleeping on the Kunming rail,
passing unseen the litchi and
mangrove plantations beneath
iron pillars the size of inverted
super deep boreholes, white
coats smooth and super clean
holding up magnetic lines we
dream along in fair sequence.

They wake on platform four as
their bullet snake feigns death
and stretches beside the others.
From station it is a short wander
adjoining a light matrix of young
starfield commons up alleyways
full of jumble markets with boxes
full of assorted future warez.com

The Failure says, my lad, place
your nose to thine florets, we'st
seek Cy's workshoponderlando.
I wish to get data drunk on junk
spam revelations incoming from
a world that cannot stop talking.
Plz decimate our pattern hungry
senses and splinter all the things.

We find her outside a bar, Thee
Melted Crayon, slurping a neon
cocktail that shee deposits behind
a hologram of an oak tree, fixing
her grip on a transparent umbrella
with a projector built in so when
you long gaze up 'neath the brolly
you see a sky full of HD digital rain

falling from where, def not this sky
as it is a sunny afternoon, sure no
Son, but so too no sky. Upworld is
a labyrinth ceiling of sly balconies
investing gravity withdrawals Cyoh
knows all too well, plastic pastelish
raincoat ready to deflect falling fish,
gamma yays, emotions, palimpsests

backing up to heaven where she'll
audit their algorithms in good time
through this demo cyan augmented
reality sun visor Cy wears daily that
produces a wireframe slow motion
delay video replay seen aka events
in her vicinity, tiny cameras mounted
within strands of hello chestnut hair.

You thinking of sewing a chip 'tween
ears and eyes scatter sensory input,
Cy tips up box of PCBs and solder ah
but I think it will just benchmark some
state of rave confusion and recursive
semiotic fission. You want not junk -
you want a hyper ethical experience
(remember, complexity isn't a vice).

She stretches northward, dude r u
savvy to the notion of what major
philosophy kids, she glances left +
right, call, whisper, Sideways Music.
The Fighter and The Failure = no.
Cy touches her heart and JS Bach
starts playing, BWV 847 via MIDI
clavier, blood pulsing metronome

guiding horizontal passage so each
note can resound in turn. Consider
with me, she tilts her smile ninety °,
if each note did not follow the other in
sequence, across time, but this order
was turned sideways, so every note
in the song played at the same time.
What a mess, right. Well how about…

Part 4

In which Cy takes The Fighter and The Failure to see four children who hack nature beside the Port of Shenzhen. The children implant a printed circuit board beneath the skin of The Failure. The board contains a dial that, when The Failure extends his thumb ninety degrees, causes him to experience a sensation whereby all time is compressed into a single moment. For The Failure, this means recognising again that he is alone.

A sunrise quartet of children flicker
wet pliers and sandpaper across
a tin bench covered in fish scales
down by eastward harbour, a four
hundred km run between cargo
ships, ghosts, bits of circuitry and
surgical gauze betwixt their poly
dancing fingers, it is right here that

Cy wants to demonstrate empirical
proof of concept already in and of the
noumenal world, these kids hacking
nature, not distorting they sez, these
young ones without even looking at
The F and The F, it is peeling back
skin of the blonde songbird to reveal
what is covered up by so much dust

and lace, as cloud strata, architecture
of hope gas that renders dirt and bone
invisible from space, fog of war, know
The Fighter walks in low orbit for this
reason, pure critique of, well so now
The Failure puts his hand onth bench
of fish scales and jump wire, coughs
backwards and says, Bleed Here Now.

The children sew a wafer thin board
'neath the anatomical snuff box of the
right hand of T. Failure containing what,
get this, they call four dimensional print
lacing with a four - yes, | | | | - terminal
potentiometer that can rotate ninety °
by extending a loom of thumb cartilage
document.body.appendChild(hope).

Spake Cy, the reason this is the word
is not because it will deliver the world
unto a box of broken biscuits. As Olivia
Newton-John stated, let us get ethical.
Say you twist temporal information at
quarter angle, sideways, it means, like
our pile of Bach notes, rather than one
thing happening after another, consider

a sin committed that you seek to later
absolve but there is no later, or before,
what then of morality if no timeline, no
woe to go because consequences and
antecedents are one and the same, if
it all happens at once it means nothing,
stone bronze tin holocene cyberpastoral
ergo a sideways morality, Be Here Now.

The punchline, Cy says, is that if space
time is vertical then ethics aint tall 'nough
to take the ride, hellooo, she places pink
fingernailed tips on Ekta, hey, into his o'
cheeks, his nasojugal crease, says ooo'
earth to Majorali Ekta, hello in thereeee,
then grabs his right hand and pushes his
his thumb all the way to its pole position.

The Fighter and The Failure look at each
other like the thin line of midday (morning
and afternoon rendered now as one) so 4
D becomes two becomes as one, and as
he moves his thumb side on Ekta sighs, so
The Fighter was the story of my youth twas
telling to The Failure that ever have I been.
Of course, I knew all this seven stanzas in.

Now worry not, Ekta quote unquote laughs,
robots have not taken over yet. This old man,
he loves failure, he has skin that feels scalier.
Sure, I loved the apoplectic fights of younger
days when my skin smooth as rocket behind -
But neither children nor Cy could decode this
solo vox out of the collapsed jumble of audio
Ekta bloomed all at once in static sonic tutti:

Ohm

Pugil

Predawn streets cup pilot light shopfronts -
newsagents, bakeries -
embers that ignite a city's slow awakening.

Katita hasn't yet served the previous day its unconscious dues, circling back to the shared rooftop garden (after takeaway Thai) as the moon rose, staring into the void (a preferred leisure) still there at sunrise, work unfinished, body yearning for close, she takes the elevator to the bakery now for metabolic reparations, fuel for undisturbed repose.

Morning.
Against all better judgement, yes it is.
What can I get you.

Cherry-blonde tumble, tousle, librarian glasses, light cheek freckles, white polo shirt up to new year sapling collarbone.

What do you recommend.
Don't answer that,
how about a cheese and bacon roll,
hold the roll. I'm delirious, I'm ok.
And where do you get arms like that

anyway, gyms should replace
dumbbells with rolling pins
and whisks.

Auburn mess, scrappy beard,
flour hands like cloud gloves.

Did you see the moon earlier.
That's kind of personal, isn't it.
We've only just met.
I knew a woman once -
Here we go.
- who was congenitally blind.
Continue.
One night when she was young her mother commented how big the moon was. She replied, what do you mean, is it not always the same size. Her mum said no, the moon appears bigger or smaller depending on where it is observed in relation to its distance from the earth.
The moon changes size.
Yes. That was something her braille textbooks had ignored.
I have a nephew who calls a full moon an apple moon and a waxing or waning moon a banana moon.
Two moons. So why are you delirious.
Can't sleep, can't work.
What do you do.

Oh you know, this and that. At the moment I'm working part-time as a travel agent for space tourism.

Which moon do you recommend.

Moons are out this season, they're going through a phase.

So what do tourists do up there.

They float around for thirty minutes and look down at the blue marble we're on and question the finite period we're given to conjure infinite variations of sweet nothing. At the end you get a t-shirt with the milky way on it, or it could be lint, depending on the box it comes out of.

How much.

Ten thousand dollars, but remember that includes the shirt.

Leif looks at Katita mathematically.

Ten thousand dollars for thirty minutes.

Give or take.

I can get that by the end of the day. How often do flights take off, how long is the waitlist.

Katita crinkles her nose and takes a bite of her cheese and bacon roll. She chews and watches Leif as he walks from behind the bread cuapboard to

step onto the street, looking up into the sky at the mulberry backlit stratus.
He walks back into the shop.

Who do I give the money to.

Do you really have a spare ten thousand dollars.

I can get it by the end of the day, I -

Yes.

- can organise something.

Okay. Well, listen it's been a gas.

Tonight I'm scheduled to fight a local guy, a cop -

Excuse me.

- for five grand, but I reckon the guy organising it would double the winnings if I agreed to fight two guys at once, and won, which I would.

What am I listening to, what is this crazy talk. Are we just being absurd right now, you know I'm fine if that's the case. What are you, a prize fighter. What is this, your dough-jo.

Yes exactly, in a -

I was kidding.

- local tournament run by some guys from the port ranks. I'm going to make a couple calls and get it set up. Ten gees. You should come along and watch.

Wow. As fun as that sounds, to see the baker who gave me a cheese and bacon roll and yarned about the moon as misperceived by a blind acquaintance step into a, what is it, a ring, I'm -

Not really a ring, just different apartments around town, King Street, Hunter Street, on a rotational basis. They clear floor space and stand well back.

- going to bid you good luck and reconsider my morning food options going forward. God speed.

Katita winks and saunters out of the bakery in a slow-motion fall that maintains its gravity all the way into the elevator and her apartment where she spills onto an op shop chaise lounge. An unnamed roommate is pouring juice and toasting a bagel in the kitchen and she says to Katita see you later on and Katita mumbles mfmahuanowha and rolls off the lounge and the roommate shuts the door on exit.

She exhales her body off the floor and lingers
airborn like dustlight before smooshing
her face against a harbour-facing window to
follow the swan dive wisp of a seaplane
dip its pontoons into the coal terminal basin.

A warm shower, that's the next step towards sleep. She's followed all the recommended procedures so far:
- don't sleep
- elevate to the rooftop after
a serving of warm Pad Thai
- stare vacantly into the void
- feel hungry
- talk to a strange baker about
moons and prize fighting
- spill onto a lounge, mumble
- view seaplane

Now structured raindrops
descend a matrix of grout
across her trajectories (Katita's phrasing)
stirring foam with sulfates,
memories want conspire
therefore towel, so cotton, moreover zzz.

Leif has passed serving responsibilities over to his younger brother so he can step out the back and get on the blower to set up a two on one fight. Everyone from the organisers to the guy he was scheduled to take on are sceptical - might not this give Leif an unforeseen advantage, perhaps it's not that easy to be part of a duo fighting someone, especially a slugger of Leif's reputation on the circuit. But when Leif offers to put some money forward to add to the kitty for his two opponents if

they win it pretty much settles things, that and when the organiser gets a call back from one of the toughest opponents Leif has fought who is keen for a shot at revenge, the event is locked in, seven o'clock tonight.

His shift finished, Leif changes in the bathroom
and begins a steady jog westward,
sidestepping craters in the alley, faking through
a chainlink fence, damask horizon
powdering brick spires, gasworks and fish co-ops
in disintegrating shadows between
him and his destination, a field out the back of an
import export customs processing
yard, between there and a rail line, empty sheds
of corrugated iron overflowing with
jilted lines of elephant legs and cardiac swoon, no
painted linguistic splash, post game
verb drippings, only images that remind him how
he threw his body down speedways,
crunched through neon petal gambits by way of
empty bus stabilities and made light
stream in an unmitigated data flow like dynamite,
with eyes like sliced lemons, sweating
dusted sugar entropy -
he'd made it as a contender.

Better living through geometry, that's a classic Leif motto, watching the weather, sensing pressure drops, repeating iconographies, the body language

of insects, city ostinatos that reveal behavioural loops, how the key to winning a fist fight is less about watching your opponent dance and more about listening out for fluctuations in audience jeers, how collectives anticipate more than they know, the data contained in the particles of their breath spittle, it tells you to step north-east and throw a haymaker at a dimple.

Jogging down King Street he detects a potential symmetry and shifts his weight for a left turn onto Perkins to land outside the old Victoria Theatre and in the face of guess who - Katita, tartan head scarf, navy blouse, double take.

Hello stranger.

You're stalking me, this is an unexpected turn in events. Did I not pay for the breadroll, did I not fulfill my end of the bargain.

Do you work here.

I mean, that's a bit of a leap.

You spend time here
and they give you money.

Well when you put it that way.

She shows him around the cavernous gloom of the converted theatre, blue folds of high luminescence peeling through divisions where pigeons still nest, necklacing a burgundy carpet draped across stage

boards. Here a television talk show format has been established with the standard guest couch, chair and desk alignment. Katita explains that she is a writer for the show, a new production. They are preparing to film the pilot episode next week.

Who is the host.

A bit of an unknown, he's done some community radio, he'll do.

How's the material.

It's a difficult birth. Shall I tell you what I've got so far.

Shoot.

I'm working on a game. Local celebrities, guests and audience members will be invited to participate each week. The premise is this: the host pretends to be a real estate agent selling a very expensive luxury home. A participant is invited to a viewing of the house, but what they want - the point of the game - is to find ways to stay in the house forever without buying it. For example, someone might say to the real estate agent: can we just stay another fifteen minutes so I can see how the sun looks at this angle through the kitchen window. Fine, fifteen minutes, that's no trouble. But then they say they would love to

smell how home made bread wafts in the kitchen, they are close to calling the bank to make an offer on the house, can they just make a bit of food in the kitchen to see if it feels right. And then the excuses keep on. Can I invite my dog over, can I ask my parents to knock at the door so I can feel what it would be like to have them come over, can I just see what the sound of traffic is like of an evening from the bedroom, can I stay for the public holiday over the long weekend to see how rambunctious the locals get, can I plant an apple tree in the front yard and see how long until roots start to take hold, quality soil is very important when buying a house, and so on. The player wins a prize if they can keep the host - the real estate agent - agreeing to their ridiculous demands for two minutes. A big digital clock starts counting down from the moment the host says, Time to close up. So, what do you think.

I think I would ask if I could raise children there, to rule lines above their heads as they grow, to see how our collected memories feel as they fill up the rooms.

That would definitely give you a couple

more years, a decade maybe, to try the house out to see if it fits. You'd probably even win a prize. You're oddly sweet, in a punchy sort of way.

Speaking of which, I need to go train. You're still coming, aren't you. Seven o'clock tonight, just down from here actually, King Street, out the back of the Lucky Country, third terrace along. Come upstairs, the door will be open. You'll know it's the right place when you step inside.

Listen mister, I'm just a simple girl trying to write interactive talk show folly -

You'll dig it. Three working class men beating into each other for money. Now that's comedy.

I'm scared and confused just enough to know I can't miss out on whatever you're involved in. Seven o'clock, I'll be the one hiding behind my hands, trying not to get blood on my shoes.

Amazing, I'll take you out for curly fries afterwards.

It just keeps getting better. I'd better get back to work, I have a skit about awkward bakery encounters that I'm putting together. You'll never believe it, the inspiration is straight out of real life.

Afternoon in the city treads duskward. Myna birds tweak, parking meters capitulate, bank loans are stamped, trams become toylike, lanterns unfold from the centre of the page creasing up into cathedral peaks, treefinger latitudes, ramen petting, stir ember fade fiasco, settle smudge.

Through these diminishing colours Katita footfalls Perkins onto King and Crown through a narrow brick corridor, pressed on one side by the band room of the Lucky Country, warm up bass arpeggios phasing through the mortar, with dim lanterns hung against the opposite wall where second storey apartments congregate above street traffic. Out front of the landing of the third apartment along is a bird cage with a cowbell hanging inside. This is the place, but is Katita really going to go up there, into whatever is happening up there - this is what she says to herself, Katita, are you really going to etc, and then she thinks, well etc, and she does.

The first thing Katita sees at the end of the hallway is an open plan living room with traffic cones set up at six positions around the middle, not dissimilar to the clay and rice straw bales that designate the dohyō arena for a bout of sumo wrestling. At the boundary of these cones two dozen plastic lawn chairs were set up, more then half of them already occupied by mostly

professionally attired men in their forties and fifties.

Katita elects to sit by herself and readies a few disarming comments to anybody who should choose to sit next to her and offer small talk, but fortunately this isn't necessary as Leif pretty much immediately walks out and takes up his position opposite her as two other men, similar build to Leif but a little older, one dressed in gym clothes and the other in board shorts and a singlet, stand in front of him at ten and two. The lights dim, a cowbell is struck and three men become one stack of muscle and flesh, like a Lucien Freud oil painting of Leigh Bowery compressed into Francis Bacon's 'Triptych' (when I say 'like', I mean precisely).

Blinking fists mod a
quick response space
invader uppercut to
the opposite of care
(polly want a wacker).

His footwork is undeniable, his haymaker a blessing. Leif throws the bodies of both his opponents out of the ring, into the kitchen, where they dampen against the tiles. He isn't even out of breath. Leif exits the room.

During the fight he made eye contact with Katita for only a single frame of the twenty four per second that comprised her cinematic attention, and for all the world he looked not like a baker, nor a prizefighter, nor even, as cliché might imbue, a wild animal, which he was far beyond during this fragment of gaze. His eyes, it would occur to Katita only later as the room was emptying of spectators, were that of unbridled fiction, a generative voidbeast, event horizons gesturing towards some collapse of the real, the world as thrill and aberration, a static horror residing within the gap between a pinwheel rolodex of academic intelligibility and cataclysmic bliss.

He scared her antiquely,
yesterday's baseline fears,
like the sun going down
on the last prime number.

They walk out together without saying a word. He presses a thick envelope into his backpack and she presses her eyes to the ground. He opens the door to Big Als where they take a booth of burger tomato red vinyl and order fries. The jukebox is playing an electro vocoder cover of The Smiths' 'There is a light that never goes out' by a Berlin based duo.

Masticating in relative silence for, say, ten minutes, Katita swallows a chip and chimes -

> *I have a recurring fantasy that I have been called in to a meeting at some high profile marketing company. They have been tasked with creating a campaign to put up a billboard announcing a new stage production of Lord of the Rings starring Christopher Walken as Gandalf. They have been scratching their heads for weeks trying to conjure the perfect tag line for the poster, when I walk in and say, "Everybody's Tolkien 'bout a new way of Walken", and then turn on my heel and leave the room, knowing that I have just presented them with marketing perfection. You know the song 'Walk Right In' by The Rooftop Singers, from the Forrest Gump soundtrack. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, as impressive as this fantasy would be if it were ever enacted, it would still be less meaningful than what you did in that apartment tonight.*

Leif wipes his lips and says, that's very kind of you to say, and the best part is, now I have enough

money for the space tourist jaunt. So, how do I set it up, should I call you in the morning and make a payment, set a date. How's it work.

The look on Katita's face is the antinomy of Leif's eye contact during the fight. He wipes his hands on his pants and says, let's head down to the beach.

They cross an empty road and ease down a sloped path that salts alongside the beach and onto the cities public baths. A single pear shaped globe hangs from a wire above the pool. Long spectator steps curve around the corner of the water, with coal ships, like watch batteries on a clothes line, just visible on the horizon.

Sitting on a bench is an astronaut.

From the change rooms a tall figure
in tan robes steps out,
dragging the sonic equivalent of

loose change

along the concrete perimeter. It is
a rope with alarm clocks
tied at intervals, clanging, ticking,

and Leif stares.

The robed figure leaves the clocks
poolside as they wade
to the pool's centre, beckoning

the spaceman.

Gliding into moonlit ripples our
astronaut glides across
to the billowing robes and waits

for immersion.

They are submerged with a hand
to the helmet, the robed
figure pushing them backwards

with one hand

while pulling the alarm clocks
in with the other,
dragged to the pool's floor

to cry out,

they ring now like whale words,
ambient pulsations,
horologe resonance chimes,

water music,

and the astronaut stays down
amidst the chorale
while Katita looks at Leif

for meaning,

so, transfixed, Leif says that
the baptism is now
complete, the astronaut can

go into space.

Let's say that Leif and Katita walk back into the city after this spectacle and as they come to a busy crossroad, a steep gutter, one puts their hand into the warm crescent of the other, palms and fingers latticed, gravitating like the spontaneous contraction of muscles around the heart, while star systems above them fight for obscurity.

Nature as Landscape

(from 'Antinimocity')

The point at which the riverrun creek transitions into a dry, walkable storm-water drain is located beneath a rail bridge that carries both freight and passenger trains (but not coal, which travels on the other side of the TAFE for a brief moment before diverting to the highfields). My dog is comfortable with the rumble now as the trains pass overhead as we trespass the drain's broad, curved trajectories from one side of the city to the other.

We don't start here, though. Our walk commences two kilometres back, two of the over five hundred kilometres of drain network across the city, expanding and contracting to varying degrees of width. The stretch we walk spans twenty metres across, but it narrows to only three or four metres as it slinks into the heights of the suburbs. Aside from a couple of bridges the drain is completely open air, seated some three metres below ground level with steep concrete walls, appearing somewhat like a baking tray or a marble run.

I first guided my dog down here after reading a book by a local author about his own walks through the drain with his dog. The book

was written in the style of the English naturalists, the walking phenomenologists who made it their mission and their pleasure to observe the area in which they lived in service of folk scientific inquiry, learning the names of the plants, the variety of birds flitting about, recognising seasonal patterns.

There is a section in the book where the author wanders beneath a fold of torn metal fencing into the disused gasworks that runs alongside the storm-water drain, and he says that if asked by any remnant security or council workers why he was trespassing, he would simply say that his dog ran through the fence and that he was just going in to retrieve him. That was enough of a license for me to do the same.

Putting aside the joy of watching my dog run free through the length of drain as far as my vision carries, in which we have never in my years of doing this come across another dog down here, and only very occasionally another human traveller, my favourite part of the trek is a length of some five hundred metres that curves out of view from the nearest bridge or roadway, not visible from the rail line either, so that for some ten minutes of walking it is as if I am the only human on the planet. It is a solipsist's dream - on one side is the abandoned gasworks, on the other an abandoned fuel depot, both vacant of any activity, and growing along the ridge of the walls

of the drain are these immense golden willows that hang low their branches and rustle like a nineteen-fifties mesh coin purse that softly pleat coins of jangled sunlight. Sometimes I lean back and watch the trees repeat their breeze-jostled sequence for twenty minutes while my dog finds a warm patch of ground to embrace.

One early morning some weeks back, beneath just this sort of gentle acceleration of sunlight, my dog and I clambered up the concrete walls of the drain at a point where a minor stormwater course joins up with the central passage and found ourselves on a raised spit of field that backs onto the old gasworks. Not only backs onto but leads into, as a nearby security gate is wide open within the surrounding mesh fence line. Until the nineteen-eighties, the gasworks turned coal, through an oxidation process, into gas for the city. Now it sits vacant, a half dozen silos casting shadows over bullgrass and dust like a batch of giant, discarded sundials. Most of the stairwells attached to the side of the silos are wholly rusted away, but one remains intact, enough so that my dog and I can ascend to the top without any hassle.

On top of the silo I feel a sudden sensation to recline on its flat concrete lid and close my eyes, my dog already doing the same beside me, in a gesture that I can only describe as being analogously triggered by another mirrored

circumstance some months prior. At that time I was, again, walking with my dog down the drain but in the opposite direction, towards an area surrounded by sporting facilities.

It was coming into twilight, but the sun was in a similar position to now, just on the opposite side of the sky, falling instead of rising. My dog leapt up the sides of the drain to get to the grass up there, preferring its soft texture beneath his paws after all that concrete, and when I followed him up I saw we were on a bank of turf behind a fence at the back of a soccer field. Soccer season was over for the year and the grounds were empty and inactive, but just like the gasworks, a security gate within the mesh fence had been left open. So, we walked in.

The grass was dry and wispy. It looked like it had been some weeks since it was last mown, and perhaps this unkempt appraisal beckoned my dog to freely bound around its quadrant. The soccer field is at the back of another sporting field, which is at the back of a tennis facility, so it is out of view of public thoroughfare when not in use. This is not an excuse to just let a dog run around a private sporting facility, nor an excuse to wander into an abandoned gasworks, but sometimes moral problems give way to aesthetic solutions, especially when ambient evening light presses its weight over an expanse such as this.

It had been a long day and a long month, and as I wandered onto the middle of the pitch, I sat down, looked up at the extinguished stadium lights, and thought about how peaceful it would be to fall back into

the grass and go to sleep there. I woke up some two hours later in the dark, with a back pocket full of missed calls from my wife.

Forty or so minutes (who is counting) after deciding to recline on the top of the old silo, I opened my eyes and realised that the same thing had happened again, just as on the soccer field - I thought it would be nice to have a rest in an empty public space and unknowingly, without anticipation, fall asleep, but who would have thought I would see it through. I woke up facing the sky with a start and gripped the roof of the silo with clamped fingers, worried I was nearer the edge than I actually was.

Slowly turning my head to the side, I locked eyes with my dog as he began reading my expression, which I immediately softened so as to not cause him any undue distress. Beyond his curled form, big brown bucket of fluff that he is, I looked across the pitched rooftops of nearby factories and warehouses, across the rail line, to the TAFE where I could see the quarters my son and I covered there, from the creek to the car park, from one magnitude of bricks to another to the courtyards in their wake.

Gazing across a broad expanse of geography fills me with a sense of pending internal completeness. When you sit on the beach and look out to the ocean or sit on a porch and look across a field towards a distant mountain range - is the attraction a physical one, a resonance with symmetry, scale and colour, the lines of the environment, an impetus to action. Or rather, is it a metaphysical

attraction, rendering the ocean and the field as metaphors, as an architecture of poetics that conjure feelings of freedom, infinity, the purity of faultless nature, and our kinship by association.

I have come to think of my relationship with landscape as one of subphysicality, beneath conscious association and physical connection, within enclaves of unintelligibility in a manner that positions these landscapes as analogous to the shape of the inland empire that is my subjectivity. These landscapes are not analogous in an abstract form within my mind; instead, they exist as my mind - subject as object.

To look from the ceiling of the gas silo across an expanse of grassland and industry is to recognise the literal chemical, electrical silhouette of my own awareness. Environmental declivities and ascensions are carved into the fabric of my consciousness as into an inverted mirror, allowing landscape to pour into the negative space at the foothold of my thoughts, providing to the body a simulation of what division without remainder might feel like.

During a recent afternoon at the TAFE, while my son and I were going up and down a stairwell that leads to a storage corridor beneath one of the buildings, I spotted a lady, in her sixties say, five foot-something, wiry and postured forthright, dressed in dark materials with patches of purple and green that I associate with tapestry, and what I saw her do was circle one of the gum trees standing fifty metres from where my son and I were on the stairwell, and she took a long eye-level gaze at the

trunk of the tree before walking over to it, turn to face the other way, and let her body fall back into the tree where, somehow, her body perfectly fit.

I had not looked at the tree previously, but based on what I was seeing, it appears that in one side of the tree there was a gap, perhaps where the tree had rotted away and left an inclination, that cupped her body as if she was born out of that very tree. When I saw her enact this scene, I thought, that's right, landscape as analogy, subject as object, she and the tree are two connected parts of a whole. She is the framework of subjectivity and the tree is the external world forged from its cast.

To talk about landscape and nature is to talk about oneself indirectly. Possibly it is the only manner in which to talk about oneself that is not socially repulsive. What I'm doing here, with this sort of writing and thinking about walking, is initiating the technology through which I escape from populated society. I enjoy living in the city, but I tend to believe that a city reaches its functional peak once it becomes empty of people.

Well, so long as it leaves for my son and me to talk its silent quarters, where the city becomes an instrument, and the sunlight that forms triangles beneath our footfalls the bow with which it is played, resonating ghost songs that are, of course, love songs in their most pure form.

Based On Your Viewing History

The last two videos he watched
(finished with replay simulacra)
were enough for him.

The first was of a wasp trying
(desperately, without success)
to reattach its own

decapitated head, turning it
(frantically, every which way)
like a rubix cube

in order to find the position
(impossible, we know this)
that reconnects

the nervous system and
(with a jolt, with relief)
allows life to continue.

The second was of a recording
(transferred via deep space)
from the surface of a

comet, never before captured,
(reflect on the engineering)
wherein we observe

grainy ice storm parallax frames
(like a grey and white flipbook)
sequenced together

from a burst of small photographs
(onboard the Rosetta probe)
to generate motion.

The wasp video has a duration
(too long for his capacity)
of one minute, while

the comet video only lasts for
(always shown as a loop)
one second, and the

question that he has right now
(that he is done with film)
is what poets would do

with these visuals compared
(think pre-information age)
with the universal

nature of images that readers
(contained within analogies)
previously related to

because they knew what they saw
(and so saw what they knew)
in regular daily life.

His Is A Quiet Carriage

Young people of a number who find producing words from their mouths a difficult task will tend to wear their consciousness lightly. They must on a coin shift weight and pivot quickly in order to pronounce alternative turns of phrase to say what they mean to say but in a new way. It causes one to acknowledge yet formally reject gravity in favour of a mode of buoyancy that relies on a method of falling upwards away from the ribbons of tongue that feel for all the world like they are woven around tank trap tetrahedra.

Twenty years ago in the nineties I had a job working for a soccer club. The punchline to this story is that the club between nineteen ninety five and nineteen ninety seven had no players due to financial declivity yet for contractual reasons the club had to continue as if they did. What I am saying is that it was my job to simulate soccer matches for radio and the occasional news video highlight reel so as to present the illusion that the Broadmeadow Magic were still a fully functioning team even though it was just me late nights in a little office beside the empty field.

One early evening near the field there was an accident where an old Commodore performed an unsuccessful merge. Bits of broken car were

scattered across three lanes and in this old mother hubbard dress the driver of the Commodore kneeled and gathered up what she could including shards of reflective plastic that caught the low sun like handfuls of wedding confetti rendered some long years later as glitter misremembered in a day drunk pollyanna dream. She looked so tired and all I could think was how much I wanted to help her go to sleep.

At times an opposing team of real footballers would visit my office to record their voice trails and ambient grunts for a radio broadcast. A couple of them would vocalise into a paper cup to add distance and space to the recording while the rest would watch The Late Show with David Letterman in the adjoining kitchenette. Our favourite episodes were the ones where Dave would ring random numbers to ask about the weather and more often than not nobody would answer and I would close my eyes and see myself in those otherwise empty homes observing the phone ring out amid pleats of dust and light.

One of the ways I would confront my stuttering was to pretend I was sleep walking through a conversation. Through this gauze of reduced consequence I would record audio broadcast summary snippets of games to be sent on to 1233 Newcastle ABC. Spaced out my mouth would lazily drawl a run of familiar names Cleary

passes to Horadam and onto Selwood and mostly I would let the other team win but on the occasions we were the victors the station would light up with calls from elated fans barely able to put into words finally we had it you know as they say in us all along.

A handful of times during this period I was asked by NBN Television to provide five second video match highlight reels for the evening news. It was one of those situations where I could have asked players from other teams to shadow play on the field but I understood due to mid nineties enamorment with arcade video game racers that less real representations of objects in the world were often more visibly believable than the so called real thing. Sega Japan had recently developed an AM2 chip for virtual reality that showed how a field mown into high contrast quadrants could beneath moon glow produce undulating motion.

And so on balmy nights with a low resolution camera in hand I would choose vantage points for the lens to rest on one or another life giving polygon shadow while through mounted speakers the then new Oasis record would play. This past week I have been time traveling through clips of Liam Gallagher one moment able to hit all the high notes he wants and then a decade later Noel talking about how Liam used to be able to hit all the high notes in Live Forever for example.

Although when I watch an old acoustic set promoting their first LP it is Noel who hits the high notes in Live Forever and not Liam.

Out on the field I would as I gazed from the field into the mountain range behind the storm drain valley and horse stables where the stadium lights cast silhouettes against the hillside see illuminated teeming millions as is the way with god to whom I was nothing if not similar in how I also used light and distance to simulate the passage of time. Although of cause we all need to admit these days that none of us around here are god least of all particularly of course god is not god anymore if you follow me. Talk about the Australian sublime no not Letterman nor Oasis nor the AM2 chip but that local down under suburban feeling of the midnight Summer exotic which I would not even say was due to being out here on the soccer pitch with its baptismal grass but rather I think because of that antique monster footfalling down the mountain with what I swore could be heard as the soft shoe shuffle of an archetype in recline as if the geography was producing its own heart murmurs padding the underside of muted skin pulled taut over soil like the opening bars of a prayer without end.

The season after this which was the final season before the club got its act together and found money to find players again I recorded my audio match descriptions in an even more

dreamlike manner that was in the modern parlance not unlike an auto sensory meridian response video where the intention is to lull the listener into a giddy state of deep relaxation. When 1233 Newcastle would play my broadcast I would watch the city fall asleep like that which Wordsworth described but in reverse. The city now doth like a garment wear its resignation into slumber.

As I would fall asleep in the kitchenette of the office beside the empty field I would from time to time see the lady in the old mother hubbard dress who crashed her Commodore near the field. Through traffic as if across a stilled lake I would walk out and embrace her. Without substitution or hesitation although she would initially think I was saying ambulance ambulance I would actually be saying somnambulate somnambulate and the traffic signal lights would change and nobody would move and with extended release of tongue and mouth I would say somnambulate and so on.

Bundlebloom

I

The sky opened up thirty minutes ago and too much rain fell out and now the rail north has been shut down. A tree fell across the line, or the tracks have been washed away, or some other ruinous event caused by a storm that is rapidly heading down the coast in our direction. No rain here yet, wherever here is, some forty minutes out from Sydney, although now sandwich boards are being blown around the platform by a wind only just starting to flex its potential. A woman in her fifties, a school teacher, shepherds sixty infant school children to a covered area near the toilets where she cups her mobile phone in both hands as if nursing soup or cradling a stick insect. She raises the device into the measured gravity of her gaze and does not blink. Over the PA we learn that buses and coaches are not able to leave the depot due to the conditions, so people had best make other arrangements to get away from here. Taxis are filing out but none are arriving.

I start receiving messages from colleagues at Sydney airport, all flights cancelled, absolute havoc, does anybody have friends in the city that can put them up, send an email to let the team

know you are safe or not. Getting a place for the night is the most pressing course of action so I ring through to our corporate travel agency for accommodation. Nothing local, all booked up minutes ago. The city is booking up quickly too now that flights are down. There are a couple of rooms left in a CBD block of luxury serviced apartments, but they fall outside of our booking policy because of how expensive they are. I ring my boss to get the all clear, either I sleep in a stationary train carriage tonight or we foot the bill for a waterproof room with a harbour view of the pending apocalypse. Minutes later I am on a standing room only train back into the city, heavy carbon clouds rolling up the rear view skyline and removing any previously visible objects in a sweep of total erasure.

Fortunately the hotel is only a two minute run from Town Hall station and most of the distance is sheltered by the elongated archways of St. Andrew's cathedral that, by way of jigsawed shadows, fashion woven brick corridors on past the rear entrance by the choir hall, the wedding steps, the maintenance garage where a pipe organ lays deconstructed, and on past the bus stop where the roofing halts and, the storm now here in all its immodesty, dumping torrents of heavy black raindrops on the streets like a fallen theatre curtain of infinitely drenched static, guides slick neon bloodlines of bus and taxi headlights from

the footpath on across the road where I hold my bag above my head and fall through the doors of the Davier Hotel. As the computers are down all rooms and keys are being manually prepared by administration on another floor, so the concierge directs me to a lounge area to wait with two women, one of whom is noticeably pregnant. They are watching a classical pianist perform on a television mounted beside ten metre high windows that, in a state of being thrashed by the storm, blockade the lobby from the street.

The pianist is a young man with his head lowered into the keyboard one minute and raised to the stage lights the next as the song, French sounding, Debussy or Rameau perhaps, flows in runs of shifting tempo decisions that bring to mind a dancer practicing a move that will lead into a jump, starting slow and then taking strides into a canter that transitions into a gentle spin and then a necessary slowing in order to take stock of the move and try again. When the man, who must be only in his early twenties, tilts his head back as the tempo restrains, the lenses of the teashade glasses he is wearing render to a state of opaque bright white, like two full moons, twins, hanging side by side in black metal frames. His hair could have been made from a manicured segment of the golden fleece that Jason returned with from Colchis, so immaculately it reclines and radiates the entire history of grain and sunlight above his

peace smoothed brow. A crack of thunder roars across the city, causing the pregnant woman to jump a fair inch above her seat. Once the sound of the thunder has dissipated the other woman turns to the pregnant woman and I and says, imagine if the pianist was not a handsome young man but instead a rather unattractive, poorly dressed old slob, can you imagine putting him on the front of an album cover of Deutsche Grammophon.

I travel through an interior walkway that connects the hotel to a labyrinth food court, an architectural mirror to the open air corridors of St. Andrew's cathedral, the choir hall now Uncle Tetsu's Triple-Baked Cheesetarts, the wedding steps a Timezone with a new Space Invaders game that I put a couple of dollars in before getting a bag of fried chicken and heading back to the lobby. The women have gone and the television is off. We have lost all power down here, the concierge tells me, but our generators are operating the elevators and the rooms, you will be fine. I travel in a golden elevator of tessellating triangles that remind me of the pixelated alien craft from Space Invaders, frozen geometric segments of the pianist's hair perhaps, his manicured fleece rendered in Euclidean ostinato patterns, micro melodic tokens pressed between rising floors that draw a line from middle C through G flat through B flat and back up to C and open onto floor seventeen.

When I enter the room it is all soft light

and dark furniture and, while not immediately resembling anything like the soft curved trajectories of a woman's body, it is nonetheless beautiful. I draw back the curtains and watch as the windows bend inward from the pressure of the wind. Later beneath the heavy crimson sheets of the bed I try to persuade each revolving piece of history in my head to fade backwards and to instead allow the inside of my mind to act as a singular vacuum of warmth and light, to absorb the insulating darkness of this room within this storm, and to dissolve.

II

A couple of days later I am with my infant son and our Finnish Lapphund, Jonsi, some ten minutes down the street, walking around a velodrome that never has its gates locked. The apron of the velodrome is a lake of clouds that my son plods his red boots in, smudging the sky against the côte d'azur, washing up against a gallery of spray painted graffiti that will drive me away from this place once he learns to read, or at least before he starts visually interpreting the more menacing designs. It begins with Hello Kitty propped up on a green leaf with High Kitty written beneath, then a Pac Man ghost holding a balloon,

looking sad, a thought bubble rising behind it containing the words Risk Shit. My dog is sitting on the next one, a pink love heart with cursive font beside spelling out, in black, Ratchet Bitches and, in yellow, Cocaina. The simplest piece of graffiti on the whole velodrome is saved for the starting line, in all capitals with no accompanying imagery, the phrase Eat The Rich.

This is one of the many isolated, mostly abandoned urban areas I bring my son and dog to wander around. For them, they get an expansive arena to climb and urinate in at their leisure (my son the former, my dog the latter, so far), and I get the security of knowing the space is mostly fenced, providing me some sort of time-stretched ambiance, out of view of motorways and the lives of others, so I can walk and breathe and think and watch my son and Jonsi play in this built up disjecta. We also visit the grounds of an uninhabited technical college that has been superseded for another campus, casting our voices across swathes of unkempt grass towards broad concrete ramps and tall buildings of infinite bricks, one of which has a clock that has misplaced its hands.

I did the same with my daughter ten years ago, bringing her to these lonely spaces to learn to play without people, to socialise with geometry, to remind myself of where I was most comfortable as a young lad, balancing on concrete wheel stops in

the car parks of the public libraries and tourist information centres my parents used to clean. And, after hours, sitting in the small parkland areas of business courtyards designated as employee lunch break quarters during the day, repurposed as daydream quarters for sensitive children to tend their melancholy of a night. I say melancholy, but really what I refer to is a heightened state of morality, as one throws a fantasy of oneself forwards in time in order to inhabit an elasticity, to feel what shapes you might need to later become.

Presently two older boys, scrappy, thin limbed lads just on the verge of teenhood, run out from beneath the scaffolded seating area overlooking the velodrome. They look like they are trying to lose somebody who might have been chasing them, likely in good humour, as they laugh and catch their breath against a metal bench. I take stock of where my son and dog are now that other souls have infiltrated our previously solitary bubble. My son is just behind me, walking across the wet grass, and Jonsi is on the high side of the track near the Pac Man ghost, his paws dripping with mud. One of the lads, the shorter of the two, feels around beneath the bench and pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter in a plastic bag. Jonsi heads over to where the boys are sitting and sniffs at their tracksuit pants. The taller boy encourages him to jump up, to shake his hand, and

he sticks his bony face deep into the thick double layer of Scandinavian fur that blankets Jonsi. I walk towards them and say, hey, careful he doesn't get you all muddy, and the lad jumps up off the seat in fright. His face for a second is all grave hollow, and I say, it's all good, I just don't want you to get dirty.

Some other kids of a similar age, a guy and a girl, run up to the lads and, after each taking a cigarette, they climb the scaffolded seats and onto a shipping container where they sit and look towards the first decay of sunlight. The container is painted green like plastic army soldiers, and on the broad side facing the velodrome entrance someone has drip painted a map of sorts, a treasure map like you used to see printed on the place mats of fast food restaurants. I look for the X but, unable to locate it, assume it is beyond the map. The kids laugh into each other as the lad who patted Jonsi stands up and improvises a song and dance routine. He is theatrical, limbs rubbery as they swing through space, his elbows extruded like pins holding together a hobby store physics experiment. I call my son over and he toddles up the slope, over High Kitty, and we lead Jonsi out towards the gravel car park.

I follow now as my son runs over to an oval shaped puddle the size of which I incorrectly imagine a prehistoric egg, like that belonging to a triceratops, would have been. Later I would look

this up and realise that big dinosaurs actually had relatively tiny eggs, the size of an asteroid perhaps after it has crumbled its way through space and landed as a pebble on a shed in someone's backyard. Or are those called meteors. From little things big things grow, but as I look at my son I think, so too the opposite. We pick up gravel rocks and I pass mine to my son to throw into the puddle. He throws them one at a time, watching each in turn as they arc into the shallow pool. Some of the rocks poke their angular points out of the water as they settle on the ground. When we start to run out of good sized gravel to throw I reach in and retrieve some of the rocks I can see leaning out of the water, but my son rejects these. He knows they have been thrown in already because they are wet. No wet, he says. He wants rocks that have not already been thrown in, that he has not already seen arc and glide from his hand into the water. Jonsi is urinating a couple of feet away from the puddle. I gather a half handful of remaining decent gravel nearby and pass them over, where my son examines them before gazing long into the water.

Protection

PS - Part 1

Three of us travelled from Adelaide to Port Augusta to facilitate a workshop for teachers on supporting neurodiverse learning needs in the classroom.

The workshop was almost called off due to extreme high temperatures in the region. It was my first time travelling through this part of the country.

I was taken by the salt lakes, pink and bouncy underfoot like a moon made from buttock, the wind farms that knit the clouds together through wind tapestry, and the way the Spencer Gulf runs up the peninsula as an ever-present line of blue on the west that does not transition into pastoralism via shore and gradient flax to aureolin and straw but rather simply cuts from water to infinite arid expanse like two pieces of unrelated film seamed together at an arbitrary junction.

A central motif of Gerald Murnane's 'The Plains' (this rhyme does not appear to me a chance occurrence) is of a horizon never reached. Not quite Beckett's joke about the life to come ('Mine was always that') but similar, less about the future

than the past, about being born with a particular subjectivity that is aware of its limits.

At the end of the first day of our workshop, after dinner, I dropped my colleagues off at our accommodation near the main bridge across Port Augusta's harbour and I went off into the evening heat to take a look around.

There have been numerous attempts over the past two decades to articulate a new category of diagnosis that may sit alongside certain tenets associated with autism and ADHD that has been referred to as 'intense emotional sensitivity', also 'highly sensitive person' and, already in the diagnostic and statistical manual, 'hyper-empathy syndrome'.

I spotted a water tower lookout that I drove to and climbed up to take in a panorama of the region. Everywhere was monochromatic, either dusted in black shadow or fired in orange embers, from the water to the flats to the township and the mountains against the skyline that would, shortly, collapse its light and leave only void. I took that view back to my room for the night, a neat bedsit walled with corrugated iron, and considered a fantasy.

The fantasy begins like this - a witch and a hacker live together in a small regional setting. Say they are life partners, they are lovers and colleagues, working together in order to do what, to perform miracles of nature.

One of the core literary lessons I have taken from Murnane is in consideration to what is left in your mind after you put a book down in the minutes, months and decades that follow. What remains other than, at best, a few strong images.

With the diagnostic opportunity to classify emotional sensitivity, we are presented with a strong opportunity to create a punchline about yet another facet of being human (all too human) that can been pathologised.

I'm on the affirmative for its consideration.

Thank the Romantic period, perhaps. Like the aesthetic framing of beauty in certain prescribed natural spaces, so too the idea of the easily wounded individual, the fragile soul, someone for whom life is too painful and overwhelming and so they turn to a quiet life of rural walks, poetry and abundant yearning.

The witch and the hacker could be set in one of Gerald Murnane's eastern-European folk story fascinations, a Hungarian village with a deep well, a place he has never seen in real life due, perhaps, to his unwillingness to use air travel.

Looking out through the gauze door on my accommodation, towards the harbor, remembering the panorama, I remembered too that I saw a tunnel of smoke billowing.

Twenty years after reading Ulysses I see a stone tower by the ocean, a carriage following a hearse, and a faceless huddle of drunk doctors. The

same period on from Gravity's Rainbow, I see a vapour trail from a balcony covered in bananas and a mechanical octopus on the beach near a casino.

I have never been in a war zone, but it was all too easy to associate a collage of how many hundreds of recent amateur video recordings of smoke rising from rocket-fall in the Ukraine with the rising plumbs I saw fusing with the Flinder's Ranges as I thought about the witch and the hacker.

He hacks into the phloem of trees, the inner bark pipeline of data that he translates into a public vocabulary that the witch then metabolises in her brew.

The second day of our workshop goes well and we get on the road at a decent time afterwards.

I say that Murnane has never seen Hungary in real life, but he would likely take issue with this and conjure his seemingly Heideggerian-inspired compound terms.

After two days of talking about school my colleauges and I talk, on the drive home, about our own kids and the various challenges they have faced across the years, particularly when confronted with compliance requirements.

Say the hacker is approached by an astronaut who met an angel in the uppermost layer of our atmosphere.

For Murnane, the image-landscape of Hungary and the image-woman who walks up to the image-well for water are just as real after reading them in a book and casting them to memory as walking down the street and processing the image-landscape of rural Victoria and the image-newsagents and the image-hotel.

But what about tens of thousands of lines of dialogue, of plot trajectories and character development. Enjoyed at the time of eyes on the page, soon to dissolve into so much forgotten minutia in the period beyond the book.

What if the astronaut and the angel need help conceiving. While the hacker and the astronaut look towards the smoke on the horizon, beyond the wheat fields, imagine a conversation between the witch and the angel, about what the angel can see from up there, in the exosphere.

You must attend this many days a week, you must complete the assessment task in this manner, you must be present in the assembly hall for the duration of the period.

The three of us conceded, on the road beyond Port Germein, that as students we were all remarkably non-compliant in the face of mainstream edusocial mores, hence our current employability in teaching educators how to, essentially, reject human standardisation.

To my eyes, the main diagnostic feature of emotional sensitivity in the many hundreds of

students and adults I have lived with over the years, present company included, is that they feel things too much.

From an interview with Gerald Murnane, question: there are people now who write about such feelings of being a little bit separate from the world and making lists and making lots of categories and would say that that's a slightly autistic way to be in the world.

The title of an article about Murnane, 'An Idiot in the Greek Sense'. Another, 'A puzzle: an author completely in control, and yet utterly uncontrolled'.

The hacker has an idea involving egg incubation via a tree that is launched like a rocket into low orbit, but what about the pending war on the horizon, the smoke leviathan threading its way from the border.

Imagine a conversation between the witch and the angel about what the angel can see from up there and how she tells the witch that on high the world does not appear as a vessel worth preserving, too non-descript and ahistorical, but down here, in the dirt, she wants a baby and she wants it to thrive.

The jetty at Port Germein, which we turned our car around on the highway to visit after reading a sign advertising it as the longest in the southern hemisphere, stretches beyond view. From memory it is over one-and-a-half kilometres

long due to how perpetually low the tide is. I watched an image-woman and her two image-dogs run across the limitless image-seaweed bed.

Emotions are too big. When someone else feels a negative emotion, like embarrassment or shame or fear, the emotionally sensitive person will empathise too much and bring it doubly upon themselves.

While they feel too much they nonetheless crave emotional experiences, although they learn very early on that some emotions can travel down a pathway directly, in abundance, into the nerves of not just the figurative heart, but the whole literal body, causing painful overload.

And so, they filter and restrict the incoming social data (and sensory data, Cartesian dualisms be damned) to reduce the potential of being hurt.

Murnane's response to the interview question: I may be that way. You asked me a question like this once before, and the moment it came out of your mouth I bristled, I thought 'I'm getting out of here', but you asked it in a much more friendly way today.

The hacker wonders if they should fight the approaching war machine by creating weapons. It would only take some minor adjustments to the egg incubating tree, by way of creating a tree-shaped mechanical fish that inverted the conception properties of the original

design, with sea-launch intracontinental ballistic capabilities.

Driving back to Adelaide feels much quicker than the trip to Port Augusta. We arrive just before sundown.

Social vocabulary becomes limited because the filter is always up. The highly sensitive person wears an opaque lens that clouds the abundance of possible emotional dangers. And, with this limiting, comes a solitary exploration of interiority.

These explorations may arrive as carefully coordinated social fantasies with players on a stage, but more often than not they manifest as a collapsed, filtered set of core images that provide an education, through memory, on the many social and sensory lessons observed, but not experienced, during youth.

What if the angel and the astronaut have a baby, nursed into life by the witch. The hacker travels to a mermaid he and the witch know, she lives on the coast. She helps launch a prototype mechanical fish rocket out of the water and its potential for wartime success is immediately apparent. The hacker goes on to dream up more weapons.

In Murnane's writings, from his first published work all the way through to his last, the same set of visual motifs from childhood that play out against, not with, the image-life of his adult

existence: horse racing (recurrence), fantasies of foreignness (life as others must experience it, past the horizon of the plains) and all manner of light passing through coloured glass, whether through marbles or church windows or wherever else sunlight can be filtered through an opaque lens, the core analogy of his consciousness.

I drop my colleagues at their hotel and I find mine some half dozen blocks towards the Botanic Gardens where I see twenty-metre high neon signs advertising a, quote, garden of unearthly delights, part of what I learn is the Adelaide fringe festival. The night air is all heat, less so than the regional interior a half-day earlier, but still at the upper-reach of balmy.

There is a magic show that begins in twenty minutes for which I buy a ticket. While waiting I wander between fairy lights, carnival rides, stand-up comedians, a young woman passed out beside a circus tent and an identical-looking woman walking away on stilts.

For dinner I buy a bao and a warm cinnamon doughnut.

The term autism is derived from the greek 'autos', meaning 'self'. Locked into the self, unaware of others outside the self, unable to empathise with others outside the self, nothing but rigid, unfeeling, clinical self.

What we have learned, by listening to autistic individuals, is how much some are

connected, always, to others, and rather than lacking empathy they rather experience too much of it, over-thinking what others might be thinking and feeling, in debilitating abundance. And so, they filter.

In Murnane's self-purported last book in which he reviews all the works he has published across his life, he ends with a lyric he has written, in Hungarian, for some music he has composed.

The witch and the hacker talk about the angel, the astronaut, their newborn baby and the military aggressors, a conflagration of armaments, marching onwards.

Similar to how the diagnosis of Asperger's became absorbed by the broad categorical reach of the autism spectrum so too, in some domains, are the boundaries of autism dissolving beside the presence of neurodiversity.

I've had the pleasure of sitting down with Judy Singer, the Australian sociologist responsible for coining the term, for an afternoon in her living room, talking about how the idea of neurodiversity is just not an attempt at signaling how we all have uniquely different minds, but how valuable this is to society, akin the ecological benefits of biodiversity.

The magic show involves acrobatic displays involving a Hungarian gymnast who rolls on top of a large inflated white balloon. She then opens the balloon and sticks her arm in, plugging

the deflation, and gradually fits her other arm, head, torso and, with her legs, her whole body inside. She rolls around the stage and when the balloon pops it becomes apparent that she has disappeared completely.

Moving on then from diagnostic categories, of this being autism and this being ADHD and this being sensory-processing disorder and this being hyper-empathy syndrome and so on, what interests me most in an age of neurodiversity (see: the Romantic period) are the profound interiorities we gain access too through the uniquely channelled, filtered sensitivities of individuals who find sustained methods for giving light to their reflections.

Would it be an ironic historical twist if the highest quality and most sensitive depictions of human subjectivity were those derived from a subset of the population slandered as lacking emotions and a capacity for empathy, or would it be a long-game justification of the word 'autos' / 'self'.

The last lyric, translated into English, that Murnane puts to music, is 'Help me, dear one, to ensure patiently my going back to my own sort of heaven'.

And I imagine the hacker telling the astronaut, before sending a message through to the mermaid to commence the rocket sequence, to put their baby to sleep in his space suit tonight, for

warmth.

The walk back to the hotel does not take long, and it is only a short time after this that everything turns white.

Sandsync

PS - Part 2

Quote from Les Murray: It has taken me this long to get some idea of what the other people are thinking. I used to refer to them as the humans, you know - 'what are the humans thinking about' - seeing myself as a bit of a stranger to the human race and trying to work it out.

I arrived home in Newcastle late last night and when I woke (late) this morning my family had already gone off in their own directions for the day. My work travels from the week owed me time in lieu, so I take my leave now (today), wipe sleep from my eyes and walk to the ferry on the harbour.

The little olive and khaki-toned tub chugs across the Hunter River, blending in its wake the sparkle of blue sky mirror into a milky froth as if a centrifuge were harvesting foam from shimmer to later be collected and pressed against the horizon in a smudge of faded mountain or pending cloud arrangement.

A memory from the past, driving through Hunter Street past a war memorial. My daughter, thirteen, asked if the statue was wearing khaki and

then my son, three, said car key, the soldier has a car key, and he thought it was a terrific joke.

Reading through some e-mails before butting up against the Stockton shoreline, I see one from a chap who runs an on-again off-again pirate radio station across Newcastle, 89.3 FM. The other week I sent him two recent tracks I'd finished and he put them on rotation. It turns out, from this e-mail, that one of the tracks has been receiving a lot of positive feedback from an online community of 89.3 enthusiasts and he's cueing it up every other hour.

Twenty-something years on from when the astronaut placed his and the angel's baby in one of his space suits just before a white flash rendered finale we meet a woman living in a heat haze desertscape. She is looking against the horizon for her partner, who wandered off days ago from their dwindling community of tent folk to look for water.

Stockton seems a little closer to the sun than Newcastle, which is foolish as the area is visibly lower but it is the abundance of sand and the way the peninsula interpolates beach into city with increasing resonance until only endless ivory dunes remain, beyond name or map designation, that makes it feel particularly solar.

This runs counter to the many occasions I have considered that moon and beach are analogies for one another. The sun is not a beach

although of course its body creates sand. At one stage the moon would have been a droplet of ice floating towards the sun until an atomic greeting furnaced it into a big ball of chalky sand.

My hair has grown too long in the wrong direction so I walk down the main street of Stockton to find a barber. On the way I see a charity clothing store that has a display in its window of white plates with Sweet Peas painted on, a teapot nestled within a royal blue crotched cosy and, what sends me inside, a small plastic portable radio. The elderly man serving shows me how it turns on and generously pops a couple of new batteries in it.

I figure the radio on the street and tune it between bands of static to pick up ghost monologues and AM strings. This is the first time in how many years I have held music in my hand without the potential of a phone call coming in, but of course like a well-timed punchline I then hear the tut-tut-tut signal interference through the speaker as my phone receives a text message.

From 'Portrait Of The Autist As A New World Driver' where Les Murray describes how *A car is also a high speed hermitage, questioning who would put in a telephone, that merciless foot-in-the-door of realities.*

And, *Under the overcoming undimishing sky you are barely supervised: you can let out language to exercise.*

Exercise is one thing, but the perfection of it is something else. That's what I keep returning to, why this form of literary writing for those within this spectrum of emotional and sensory sensitivity. It is not coincidence that the two Australian authors of the present generation deemed most likely to win a Nobel Prize have both been aligned with autism.

Riddle: consider what made John Maxwell Coetzee say that Murray is 'not a poet of the inner life', that he 'instead relies on an acute sensitivity to sensory impressions and an extraordinary capacity to articulate them', and the relationship between this comment and the manner in which both Coetzee (now a longterm resident of Australia), Murray and Murnane have all been referred to as, quote, a little bit autistic (never the full diagnosis, always on the border districts).

Looking for her partner, the woman applies her dust filtration apparatus and walks into the desert where, after a half-day trek, she comes across a small grove of flowers. They are paper brittle natives, nothing out of the ordinary, but the grove structure is unique, a walled hemisphere of stepped foliage, feathered salt that masks a drop in temperature sourced from behind.

Eager for some food I push through the plastic blinds of a fish and chip shop and order some battered whiting. Sitting and waiting

outside I try to tune the radio in to 89.3 but I'm unsure whether I've got a clear signal and I'm listening to a piece of experimental post-rock art noise or whether it's just detuned hiss. Either way it sounds like my sort of thing so I set the volume to a considerately low public level and enjoy.

After lunch (soft white fillet reuleaux triangles folding and separating) I walk down a pebblecrete arcade and spot a barber shop beside a tobacconists. I head in and get shown straight to a seat where a young man just out of high school asks me what I'd like (I put my hands out in a pleading fashion, whatever it takes to make me look my age in a non-ridiculous manner, but where should the clippers take their lead from the scissors, just do your best).

Asked what I do for work I mention autism and my barber nods, I know a bit about that, he says. My girlfriend and I, we took an online test the other week and if you scored eighty you probably had autism. I scored around sixty, my girlfriend got over one hundred.

He said that he personally has an ADHD diagnosis with perhaps a few autistic traits. What sort of traits - well I talk a lot, he says. And I kind of daydream I guess.

My girlfriend though, he says, she's an accountant. He says I remember when we first went to meet my family at someone's house for lunch, my girlfriend cried on the way there, she

was so nervous. And she doesn't like watching movies because she thinks they're all cruel, the characters, it doesn't matter if it's a comedy or action.

From 'It Allows a Portrait in Line-Scan at Fifteen' where Murray talks about his son who used to attend the same school I taught at for many years: *He has forgotten nothing, and remembers the precise quality of experiences*.

What if the woman pushes her dust filtration mask back and wedges her body between shafts of paper leaf and wall-dusted melaleuca to find a hole in the ground. She can hear a shout wet with reverberation - help. It is her partner.

She fashions a rope from twisted wonga wonga and lowers it down a long, long way.

I walk out to the breakwater and look across the channel to the opposite breakwater on Newcastle's peninsula that extends out beyond Nobby's lighthouse. This is the first time I have stood on the Stockton side after having looked out at it for how many years.

There is a shipwreck, the Adolphe, cast against the rocks two-thirds of the way towards the breakwater endpoint. A metal plaque reads that it was built in Dunkirk in 1902, a French ship, and was only two years old when it sailed from Antwerp to Newcastle and, a word I've not read before in this context - foundered - on the oyster bank at the mouth of the harbour.

Looking down at the spinal remnants of the Adolphe, like the skeletal remnants of a gutted length of whiting, I think of Les Murray's major novel in verse 'Fredy Neptune'.

The major plot catalyst occurs ten stanzas in, a tragic violent event observed by the protagonist (a group of women in Turkey, during World War I, being burned to death) which results in the protagonist, huddled in the sick bed of a ship, losing his sense of touch. His body is rendered white and numb and is assumed by those around him to be a form of leprosy.

He is put ashore quickly and left on the coastal flanks of Turkey to beg and survive (A bad place for a Dungog man, waiting for bits to rot off him). But of course he is not leprotic, he is traumatised. Our protagonist has witnessed an event that has caused him to feel it on and in his body so intensely that he is no longer receptive to external stimuli.

His fellow sailors witnessed the same event but were not reported to have suffered in the same way.

What is the internal drive for the emotionally sensitive soul to render the world in beatific language. We know from neuroscience that reading turns the same lights on in the brain that experience does - it simulates, synthesises, the act of living.

And if reading is a surrogate for living,

then what is writing but a way to daydream concretely. To remember through representation, marked by lines on a page, in ways not accessible by way of any other medium, forged in isolation, safe from social harm (a good place for a Dungog man).

On the beach near the breakwater now, not the side of the beach that is rapidly slipping into the ocean, the other side where dogs tumble over mounds of coastal spinifex, I sit with the radio and try 89.3 again and get a stronger signal this time, still weak but with more form. There are beats, those are certain.

While the woman is down in the cavern with her partner he shows her a miracle. There is a lake down there, unheard of to see a full body of water in this age. She bathes in the underground waters and feels something change within. A voice speaks between her bones. After many hours they climb back out to the surface.

When Les Murray was invited to give a poetry reading at a bowling club in Taree in early 1988 it was a moment for the local son now national literary hero to enjoy a victory lap on his home return. What he didn't anticipate was a former classmate cheerfully greeting him after the reading by reminding him of one of the cruel nicknames she had given him during their school years.

Within days Murray is barely functional.

His physical sensory system is topsy-turvy and his emotional and cognitive world is fractured. Like the protagonist from Fredy Neptune he experiences an overwhelm of pain that is replaced by a dissociated state which, as recorded in his memoir 'Killing the Black Dog', manifests as depression.

From Fredy Neptune, '*No pain, nor pleasure. Only a ghost of that sense that tells you where the parts of you are*' and '*It isn't hard to do from memory: curse when burnt, hunch when you see it's cold, don't hammer fingers or let your leg bend to the pop! stage*'.

When Coetzee said that Murray is not a poet of the inner life but rather focuses on sensory impressions, I want to respond and note that it is through sensory impressions that the inner life is revealed. Emotional sensitivity is worn on the skin.

Taking the ferry back to Newcastle, little plastic radio in hand, I have a mind to take a swim at the Bogey Hole to round off the afternoon before I head home.

After a time the woman and her partner realise she is pregnant. This is another miracle as natural pregnancies have not been recorded within the fictional structures of this narrative for generations. The woman herself was of course birthed into being some twenty years ago via nature hacking when the witch and the hacker established a way for her parents, the astronaut and the angel, to imagine new life.

Which means, doesn't it, that it isn't a stretch to consider that the weapon the hacker initiated that created that vaporising whiteness from which the woman, the baby in the astronaut suit, was protected from, was also what created that lake of life giving water beneath the desert sands. It gave life to the daughter of the astronaut and the angel and now it has given her too the capacity to generate life.

Was this how the hacker and the witch ethically justified the weapon, to defeat the war effort by erasing everybody as a sacrifice for beginning life again.

Les Murray opens nearly all of his books with the same line - *To the glory of God.*

And what was it that Jesus said in Matthew 10 - *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

The Bogey Hole, convict built in the early days of British imperial rule, is a shard of opalescent sky pressed deep into the earth, into the presiding caves, of the coastal shelf. There are around two dozen other bathers playing in the water, but I am only nominally aware they exist as I float at the edges of the pool beside my radio receiving full reception here. And hey, what do you know - they're playing my song.

The Body of this Story

This story is about Dostoevsky and Euripides and The Red Baron and Hatsune Miku and Dr Sidney Freedman and The Michelin Man and Terry Thomas and Rei Ayanami and Isaiah Berlin and Thomas Bernhard and Raskolnikov and Bill Hicks and Albert Camus' mother in her chair on the balcony not really hearing or saying anything for long stretches of time and Hawkeye Pierce when he tells Sidney Freedman about the smell of a wet burlap sack and how similar the melody to Komm, süsser Tod sounds to the Hatsune Miku song Because You're Here and Terry Thomas asking Someone you know of Jonathan Winters and the Asterix comic where they come across The Michelin Man outside a motel or a service station from memory or the equivalent in Ancient Gaul which I think might have been added for an anglicised version of the story as the original had a French character that might not have been well known outside its country of origin again this is from memory and The Hedgehog and The Fox and choosing exile in one's old age like Euripides although this is contested now like Dostoyesvky's gambling debts but how he asked a friend to tell him all about children in a letter the

games they play and mannerisms and so on for the book that came to be The Brothers Karamazov with little remaining really of what we might have thought a book about children would include unless a young version of Raskolnikov perhaps or when Bill Hicks talks about a scene from Shane that nobody has ever been able to track down where he says pick up the gun as a metaphor for American foreign policy and Isaiah Berlin when he was mistaken for Irving Berlin and White Christmas and opening a present on Christmas morning and Thomas Bernhard pops out and wheezes about Austria bless him and The Red Baron only twenty five when he died shot down by an Australian gunner if the story is to be believed which it should I suppose so far as memory can be trusted which just ask Hawkeye about such matters he might just start sneezing again like Albert Camus when he kept retiring to his bed on that cross Atlantic boat journey when his tuberculosis would flare up only seventeen when he was diagnosed same age give or take some months when Thomas Bernhard was diagnosed with the same age give or take when Hatsune Miku went on tour but the production company decided to not bring the hologram projection technology along which is the whole point the voice is not enough where is the body tell me Raskolnikov where is the body Terry Thomas frantically saying Have a care, that chap's run absolutely amok or to quote Euripides love makes the time pass and time makes love pass if he actually ever said that or when Isaiah Berlin said he'd rather be remembered as serious and grave rather than funny which I know the feeling

even though Nietzsche would be disgusted the memory where I hold a girl's hand when I am a boy in early schooling and a friend holds her other hand and laughs and I frown at him and shake my head no you must not laugh while we dance in a circle I want her to take this seriously this is a melancholy moment where I want everyone to be as quiet as possible so she can hear the noise my heart is making in her memory or the equivalent (Where is the body? It never left).

Hesse

I.I

When I turned forty, I began re-reading stories and essays that Hermann Hesse wrote when he turned forty.

There is just over a century between us. One hundred and six years, two months and eleven days.

We're practically brothers.

I.II

When I was sixteen I first read Demian. A friend loaned me a copy from his father's library.

Hesse wrote Demian when he turned forty. World War I was a graveyard of ghosts and ashes and so was he.

After the disintegration of his family, his country and his previous model of reality, he went off to live alone.

I.III

From this position, Hesse developed a new line of enquiry within his works that significantly built on his earlier thinking.

He doubled down hard on a central thesis: the only true thing is the voice you hear inside of yourself.

To quote from Demian - 'Gaze into the fire, into the clouds, and as soon as the inner voices begin to speak, surrender to them. Don't ask first whether it's permitted, or would please your teachers or father or some god. You will ruin yourself if you do that.'

As well, from the same year that book was published, 1919, in a letter to a young German - 'Search where you may, no prophet or teacher can relieve you of the need to look within. Our mission is solely to remind you that there is a god and only one god; he dwells in your hearts, and it is there that you must seek him out and speak with him.'

I.IV

The model of truth that Hesse weaves through his works is tied to the same thread initially spun by Nietzsche that would, in time, come to trip up the whole twentieth-century apparatus of knowing anything with certainty.

Well, maybe it didn't start with Nietzsche - maybe it was Pyrrho of Elis or Zeno of Elea, or

someone else from Classical antiquity who wondered if everything was neither binary (this or that) or infinity (everything) but rather both divided into each other, indivisibly, forever. But it was Nietzsche who made it modern and gave it a catch phrase.

Supposing that truth is a woman, says one of the loneliest men in Switzerland in 1885. What then - when truths are merely illusions that we have forgotten are illusions, when everything is perspective, when that's just your opinion, when we, the ones trying to swoon truth, are dynamic multiplicities of drives and forces forever in flux. When god is dead tired and didn't have time to finish all the details on a subatomic quantum level, because who would ever think to look there, reality is still being constructed, just wait a little longer.

And so you get Nietzsche into Heidegger, World War I and Dada, Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, World War II into poststructuralism and postmodernism, Wrestlemania and reality television, twenty-four-hour news channels, the internet, artificial intelligence hallucinating. Or, in a nutshell, the deity is in you, says Hesse - 'truth is lived, not taught' (you are the shell and the nut is opening up).

The Guardian this morning, after the election, ran an ad that says - 'This is the moment for truth, help us protect it'.

I.V

In Hesse's description of the time he spent in his forties at a spa in Baden, recovering from ill health (of both a physical and nervous dimension, so says the doctor, the old Cartesian dualism, head and body, but Hesse channels the spirit of the age and says no, there is another possible diagnosis), he describes going downstairs into the catacombs of the health resort he's staying, the stone basement where the hot baths are readied for guests and, upon reclining into the water and looking up into the high ceilings, he sees soft light from the aboveground world peeling through windows down into his morning eyes.

After World War II, a Japanese fan of Hesse's wrote to him in a state of great idolatry - Hesse had shown him the truth about life, and now this fan wanted to write his own works, in homage to Hesse, to deliver the word to others. The reply letter was harsh, paraphrasing Nietzsche, always ('this is my way, where is yours? To those who ask me the way, I tell you, the way does not exist'), but not without reference to another window, like that one at the spa - I am not a source of light to bathe in, Hesse tells his young Japanese colleague, I am a window that simply does its best to allow light to pass through.

I.VI

There is a narrative of the twentieth century that runs like this - community lost out to the individual. As folks started believing in institutions less and less (for good reason, right? Hesse is the non-conformist model for this trajectory - think of that line from Demian about listening to yourself, and 'don't ask first whether it's permitted, or would please your teachers or father or some god': schools crush the spirit, parents do what Larkin later put to verse, and the church is irrelevant, to say nothing of the horrors enacted by the ruling class to manifest World War I and II. Who would ever want to listen to anybody else ever again?), collectives dwindled.

Across the century we moved into housing developments in satellite towns, neighbourhoods of neighbours avoiding neighbours because everybody was running late for the expressway, it takes fifty minutes in good traffic just to make it to work on time, if you don't have to stop for petrol (which you do, for sugar and coffee if nothing else). Our unions lost collective bargaining power and our political movements lost agency because everybody was focused on their own plot. Capitalism found a way to turn our loneliness into a marketable package, selling niche sub-genres of clothing and music, your own personal style, where you can express who you really are (gone are the days of everybody wearing hats, let your mohawk and feathers plume).

I.VII

This is how the counter-cultural movement found its wings, and they took Hesse for a prophet. During the sixties and seventies, Hesse became less about his roots in the German Romanticism of Goethe and Nietzsche and more about Timothy Leary and LSD. Leary anointed Hesse the poet of the interior journey. The exotica of Eastern Spirituality became very important in the search for truth (set in motion two centuries earlier by Schopenhauer, timed neatly between Goethe and Nietzsche, or was it Britain's colonial rule over the Indian subcontinent from 1858, or the availability a century later of increasingly affordable airline journeys to Asia from Los Angeles, of globalisation, of some other truth), Buddhist yearnings and pilgrimages to India which seemed to bow a string from Ravi Shankar's sitar collaboration with George Harrison through to nineties acid rave culture (when I was reading Hesse) towards the approach of Y2K, dreams at the end of history, how many Geocities websites seemed to celebrate the Hale-Bop comet. And then, September 11, weapons of mass destruction, mobile phones, the end of Britannica Encyclopaedia, the end of Encarta, it's all on a Wiki, from the Hawaiian 'wiki wiki' meaning fast, the speed of truth when truth is crowd-sourced.

I.VIII

There is a peculiar book I bought twenty years ago called 'C.G. Jung and Hermann Hesse: A Record of Two Friendships'. The subject matter isn't the peculiar part - it's a book written by a Chilean Diplomat about going over to meet with Hesse and Jung during their old age, to talk about all sorts of cosmic things: myths, archetypes, symbols, and so on. The conversations with Hesse don't add much to our understanding his work, but the conversations with Jung are interesting for reasons I'll share, but first, the reason the book is peculiar is that its author, Miguel Serrano, who comes across as fairly innocuous with his take on spiritual topics, was, it turns out, a proponent of what he called Esoteric Hitlerism. He was a prominent Nazi sympathiser and shared the idea that after World War II, some Nazis escaped to a subterranean world inside our hollow earth, establishing secret bases, particularly in Antarctica.

Is that what happens when you treat your own truth as paramount? Did Serrano look inside of himself and find a world of Nazi leaders migrating towards the core of our planet to set up a base for their future plans? I'll tell you the interesting conversation he has with Jung - there is a section in which Serrano talks about wanting to isolate and meditate and find a way to know himself, his unconsciousness, well enough to

resonate some sense of peace and understanding into the world (to defeat Communism, if I'm reading him correctly); anyway, Jung replies by telling him that, quote, "nobody can become aware of his individuality unless he is closely and responsibly related to his fellow beings, he is not withdrawing to an egoistic desert when he tries to find himself. He can only discover himself when he is deeply and unconditionally related to some, and generally related to a great many, individuals with whom he has a chance to compare, and from whom he is able to discriminate himself. If somebody in supreme egoism should withdraw to the solitude of Mt. Everest, he would discover a good deal about the amenities of his lofty abode, but as good as nothing about himself, i.e. nothing he could not have known before'.

I.IX

The year after Demian was published, Hesse, having left his family home, his family, his life, goes on a wander, alone. I wonder what Hesse would have thought about Jung's sentiment here, that truth, consciousness, is a shared experience. Crowd-sourced. The brief book of prose, poems and watercolour illustrations that Hesse created on his wander called, wait for it, Wandering, talks a great deal about enjoying his solitude and learning much about himself through the absence of other people. "The world has become lovelier",

he writes, "I am alone, and I don't suffer from my loneliness." He does use the word 'alone' quite a lot though, like when he says, "The way to salvation leads neither to the left nor the right: it leads into your own heart, and there alone is god, and there alone is peace".

But peace is a contentious word here. During both world wars, Hesse was castigated from both sides for his constant pacifism - he was accused of anti-patriotism by fellow Germans for not being in favour of the war, and harangued by anti-war folk for not protesting enough. He was approached by many who asked him to contribute to their activism - Max Brod, famous for being Franz Kafka's friend and, ultimately, not burning Kafka's writings after his death even after explicit instruction from Kafka to do so. He took Kafka's manuscripts with him to Palestine after the Nazis occupied Prague, and when the 1948 Arab-Israeli war was heating up, Brod wrote to Hesse and asked him to lend his voice to the protest against the war, that his name, two years after Hesse had won the Nobel Prize, would make a difference. Hesse said no. "Our business is not to preach or to command or to plead but to stand fast amid hells and devils."

He then goes on to say that he knows people will accuse him of being "one of those dreamy artists who believe that art has nothing to do with politics, that an artist must live in an

aesthetic ivory tower for fear of corrupting his vision by contact with crude reality, or soiling his hands", but this was not Hesse's position. His stance was that as a writer, he should focus on reminding his "readers of the fundamental commandments of humanity". And again, as he wrote to a young German in 1919, he suggests looking within oneself - to not be twisted and crushed by the machinations of politics and war, to know oneself well enough to say *no* to fascism, to say *no* to totalitarianism and violence and terror and prejudice: what more can be offered? If you can be sure enough of yourself to navigate the ethical mountains of our time, is this not its own form of activism (as long as you aren't Miguel Serrano, although who knows what he actually found in himself and what sort of demons he conjured in his own troubled ego and took him to Hesse and Jung in the first place).

I.X

If Hesse is right and truth is found through self-reflection, and if we recognise that the twentieth century has been a bit of a mess so far as truth-seeking goes, where even mathematics couldn't escape falsification and paradox (thanks Gödel), and if we consider the political critique of self that says through our individualism we've abandoned any opportunity to gather together as a

collective in order to exert power against our oppressors, and that while journalism seeks our support for its attempts at truth-telling, it's still pretty difficult to trust any sort of authority outside of ourselves, then it should also be said that when Hesse talks about truth, he's rarely talking about it remaining in its singular form. Jung said that we shouldn't withdraw to an egoistic desert to find ourselves, but Hesse might say that's not even possible, because the truth is so plentiful, that we contain such multitudes, we are more than enough to keep ourselves company.

What begins as a single truth, for Hesse, a single vision of what it is to be human, is always, time and again in his work, taken on a journey of fragmentation, like white light through a prism, in which that initial, single truth then splits into many resonating truths. An infinite number of truths. This brings us into contact with some mystical, universal spectrum of existence that is less often named than it is visualised. It is Hesse's way of saying that from that quiet voice inside of you springs a symphony of voices; and not just voices, we hear all manner of instruments, even those not invented yet, and all sounds from the animal kingdom, and nature, both shy petal flutter during the late afternoon and the drone of tectonic plates pressing into each other beneath the ocean floor; this is what resounds when a quiet, uncertain soul with a shaky voice decides to shout

'I' into the heart of the world.

To quote from Klingsor's Last Summer, also written in 1919, that year when everything changed for Hesse, describing a self-portrait that the artist, Klingsor, has painted at the end of the story, at the end of his last Summer:

"The face is painted like a landscape, the hair reminiscent of leaves and the bark of trees, the eye sockets like clefts in rock.. he painted many faces into his picture: sweet and wondering children's faces, young manhood's brow and temples, full of dreams and ardour, scoffing drinker's eyes, lips of a thirsting, persecuted, suffering, seeking libertine.. the face of the doomed and decaying man who accepted his face: moss grew on his skull, the old teeth stood askew, cracks ran through the white skin.. and still more remotely, still deeper behind all these faces, slept remoter, deeper, older faces, prehuman, animal, vegetable, stony, as if the last man on earth in the moment before death were recalling once again with the speed of dream all the forms of past ages when the universe was young.. he sensed with a deep faith that in this cruel struggle with his self-portrait more than the face and the final accounting of an individual was involved, that he was doing something human, universal, necessary.. he conquered and was defeated, he suffered and laughed and fought his way through, killed and died, gave birth and was born".

The act of Klingsor painting his self-portrait is a metaphor describing the trajectory that a truth observed within oneself follows, if you have the courage enough to stay with it. 'The truth has a million faces', Hesse would later go on to say, 'but there is only one truth'.

And in all seriousness, it does take courage - looking into yourself, really looking, isn't easy. It's not like wondering what to have for dinner, or whether to drive or walk to the shops: it's about knowing what to do when you're asked to join the cause, to lend your voice to the party line, to know where to stand. To take a final line from Demian, from when Hesse was forty and speaking directly to my sixteen-year-old self: 'I wanted only to live in accord with the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?'

To Weave, To Fabricate

Art that works is art

that fails, because intentions
are arrows that hit when they miss -

a mistake read closely says all
that human planning cannot:

the revelation is in the breach.

Sovereignty is an Artificial Soul

'eedieAi and uddyunnunoan'
Lyrebird, Les Murray

Introduction, or The Leviathan Chews On Flowers From The Cyberpastoralist Meadow Of A Data Drunk Fantasy Spreading Its Wings at the Wit's End of Imagination.

A dear friend shared an idea with me when we were sixteen. He wondered if it would be possible to tell the future by having access to enough data on what everybody was doing and thinking. If you could map all the data and see where that person was walking to, what that person was thinking about, and what the weather was doing to that person's decisions, you could predict the subsequent tick of the second hand on the universe's clock, of what would follow.

Later, we would learn this is how meteorology and economics and all manner of predictive science operates, but at the time it felt revelatory. Looking back through history, that feeling reappears often - Thomas Hobbes thought

his Leviathan could operate in this manner by regulating society through rational algorithms, and the twentieth century found in computer ecosystems the ability to manifest this dream: every KPI, every standardised school assessment, every recommended video as a monarch of systemic maintenance.

Now, with engineers seemingly on the verge of achieving the white whale of binary computation - artificial general intelligence - this dream is once again ramping up. I understand the dream because, in part, it's what I dream about, too. When, in Dostoyevsky's 'The Brothers Karamazov', the question of evil is raised in the *Rebellion* section, it is debated whether or not evil should be looked at closely or simply turned away from, whether it is too ugly, too human, for rational consideration.

If I thought it was possible to eradicate acts of human evil simply by training the laser focus of a civilisation's worth of artificially intelligent mathematics at it, with all the necessary philosophical parameters in place, what would I say?

At the same time this vision of a puzzle society solved by super-algorithms and data analysis is being had, other events are in play. Art is facing an existential threat unlike any it has yet faced. Just when we thought computers were simply going to work on chess, gene therapy and

stock markets, it came for our art, poetry and music (and, one would assume, dance, once robots are fluid enough to tango).

Artists appear to be saying they'll just carry on without concern, and/or they'll rage against the machine and inject their original creations with viral code to corrupt future mutated remixes, and/or they'll cozy up to technology and collaborate with the latest software. Recently, I've been wondering, as I think about Dostoyevsky and our capacity to address bad stuff, if The Arts as we know them may one day come to an end (as before, so after) to be replaced by a new disruptive trajectory for output.

Hold that thought - the other week, a newspaper in Australia ran an article about the rise of ADHD diagnoses, a mirror-headline to the thousands of others across the decades on the rise of autism and so on. Reading the article, and then the comments on the article, it was clear the usual responses were coming through: our diagnostic tools are always getting better at detecting the intricate conditions of neurodiversity, there is less social stigma now about being open about these things.

But there was an interesting thread in the comments on the article that was mining another point, the social model of disability: are the work and lifestyle expectations of people today simply not suitable for those who are neurodiverse, hence

seeing more people struggle with daily life in school, at work and in relationships? Or, put another way, has the version of the world we are living in been designed in a particular way to help a subset of society achieve maximum success at the exclusion of others?

Civilisation is a sequence of dominant dreams conjured by a few powerful people to provide them and those like them with the maximum ability to retain and expand that power. We are all living in somebody else's dream, somebody's Leviathan. I'm living in the dream of capitalist economists who arbitrate the value of groceries and celebrity wages and war, of technologists who taught me to mediate digital affection, of proxy behaviourists who showed me how to look someone in the face and smile broadly with an outstretched hand ready to grip and move north and south.

There is a connecting narrative here: the social contract we're signing when we show artificial intelligence the menu being served at the Big Data Buffet; the role of the artist in a post-art culture; and, the subterfuge of our dreams at the End of History.

Data is life, all art is theft, and the future is cancelled - all is right with the world.

Set 1: To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower

If, two years ago, you had told my father that it would be possible to type a half-dozen words describing a scene of his choosing, and then a half-dozen more words describing the art genre of his choice, and that thirty seconds later there would manifest a visual masterpiece depicting exactly what was requested, he would have squinted his eyes and wondered how much of the cooking sherry you'd been into.

Today, estimates are somewhere in the ballpark of Midjourney and Dall-E and Stable Diffusion generating around four million images a day. What was, mere months ago, a seemingly impossible act of computation, is now so routine for most internet-savvy folk that it barely registers interest. On the contrary, it yields a stream of complaints about hands not perfectly formed (even the Old Masters didn't let their apprentices paint hands, perhaps AI is simply following the same gambit) which feels to me somewhat like complaining about the markings on a card deck used in a magic trick.

This process of proceeding from wonder through to boredom with technological marvels is not new - we could invoke Max Weber's "Disenchantment of the World" here, sliding from

the magical through to the material - and is experienced any time we grumble about a plane journey without gripping someone by the shoulders and exclaiming how incredible it is to have an opportunity to fly above the ground. However, I feel there is something critically important about not letting this moment of AI wonder fade into sour routine without capitalising on the possibility this dream-state might allow us. Perhaps let us do this, first, not by manifesto, but by meditation.

Set 2: Dream Baby Dream

There is a political narrative of the twentieth century that goes like this: after a few centuries of scientific revolution, from Copernicus to Darwin, casting off old systems of metaphysical power and embracing the rational potentials of being human with feet firmly planted in the soil of Nietzchean hillsides, with revolutions here and there promising power to the people, a hundred years of -isms rapidly dawned.

Then, once the End of History was announced during the nineties and solidified after 9/11, all remaining -isms were either marked as suspect or sacred, with no future revisions

necessary: Communism was out, Biological Determinism was in; Modernism was out, Nationalism was in. Not only were no future revisions necessary, but they were impossible. Slavoj Zizek and Mark Fisher were both fond of saying that it is easier to imagine the cinematic asteroid-laden alien-invaded ocean-waves-like-skyscrapers-descending end of the world than it is to imagine slight changes to funding healthcare and public education, to say nothing of policy adjustments to critical environmental issues or antecedents to crime and poverty.

Which, according to the narrative, is the position we are in now: the potential for a different tomorrow has been cancelled, and we are stuck in a state of perpetual foreverism (something Grafton Tanner argues well, taking up Mark Fisher's mantle that our culture, thanks to the tenets of ultra-efficient capitalist production, is now locked into a nostalgia loop where we cannot develop anything new but only endlessly revisit decades past, remixing and interpolating Elton John and Kate Bush forever), and even if we were able to break free of this cycle and conjure a new reality for our coming days, who would dare to dream up something that might just repeat the tragedies of last century? Don't act, just think, is what Zizek recommends. But then Bruce Springsteen keeps telling us, at the conclusion of every concert at the end of terminal nostalgia lane,

to dream baby dream - and with all this wonder being stirred across our dull roots by AI, it feels like a new season for dreaming might be here.

Set 3: Other echoes inhabit the garden

I listened to a podcast interview the other day hosted by electronic musicians and techno-theorists Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst as they talked with artist Marianna Simnett about an opera she was putting on. The opera is absolutely bonkers in terms of the narrative layers and mythological ideas injected into its fabric, but it reached hyper-maximalist levels of creativity in its futurist technical setup.

Marianna had conceived a work of art that forges collaboration between human invention and computer programming at the apogee of current possibility. Machine learning algorithms transmute one recorded sound into another, software visually projects morphed personages of the artist onto herself, dogs are made to sing with synthetic voices cloned from human tongues, 3D printers create an amalgamation of weapon and instrument on stage during the opera to be performed in the final act - all told, artificial intelligence and the latest software and hardware

is stretched to its present real-world capacities in the service of profound art. It's quite a feat.

After processing all that I heard in the podcast, my next thought was of how temporary this situation might be. Collaboration with artificial intelligence, I mean. At the moment, it is like a child savant who can calculate the world from the sand grain fragments of universe it sifts across one palm while we hold firm its other outstretched hand. But we know it will not remain a child for long. The tool that today we ask to edit our essays and paint our artworks and transpose our symphonies will soon see these tasks as childlike and will, surely, seek to put away childish things.

It already makes us feel this way - if you are an artist of any discipline and you ask AI to create, or collaborate, on a work within your wheelhouse of expertise, you cannot help but blush at its mastery. Less and less these days do you see people chuckle at something AI seems to fail at doing. A satirical website here in Australia sent out an end-of-year postcard to subscribers, written using AI, to show how poor current AI is at writing something genuinely witty. But what is the shelf life of this superiority?

Set 4: The Child is the Father to the Man

Here is one potential narrative for the near future: collaborating with AI in the manner Marianna Simnett did for her incredible opera is the last breath of what we consider traditional human creativity. The entire history of art, from cave paintings through to the heights of realism and then its abstraction and finally putting dead sharks in a tank, was with a view that humans would understand themselves and their environments better. We've done a fine job of trying to interpret our subjectivity through the manifestation of visuals, but the project deadline has arrived: it's time to submit it all at the altar of AI's Library of Babel where it will be (has been) processed. So, too, for novels and all musical compositions and dance and drama and decoupage: what more did we hope to be able to say that AI can't synthesise and take further?

The likes of Adam Curtis would say that art as a force for cultural change has never succeeded. Consider the counter-cultural art of the 1960s, he has said - artists (musicians, writers, the lot) tried to express themselves as a way of interrogating society to then influence alternative ways of living (more authentically, less conservatively), but how could they compete with the politics of power and banking that control the universal rudder? Their

art became a shout into the void, a shout and a void that was commercialised to the extreme during the End of History nineties as conceptual art tried to say something but ended up saying, according to art lovers and critics like Matthew Collings, very little. What message is Jeff Koons trying to transmit that can't otherwise be gleaned, for less money, from a Bill Hicks punchline? Francis Bacon is pathos incarnate, but how does that impact our response to evil?

Should art only be utilitarian? Absolutely not. My aesthetic is hinged on art hopefully never being used in the service of money, let alone other perfunctory relationships. I agree, though, with Nietzsche's edict that there is no such thing as art for art's sake: even if it is not explicitly political or moral, it is always trying to strengthen or weaken particular human valuations. I believe the impact of AI will change very little the intention of any individual artist who wants to paint, write and compose music, but in terms of the role creativity plays in our historical trajectory, as AI continues to develop its capacities, we will absolutely need to adjust our perspective on our output.

For those who choose to work in partnership with AI software, I think what might be thought of as equal collaboration between human and machine will be short-lived: even the most accomplished creatives won't be able to keep up with the software updates, and hence I can

imagine the software used for artistic partnerships will be significantly limited compared with what its full capacities could be. It'll be somewhat like communities of present-day electronic musicians using archaic text-based tracker programs and cassette players for composition: nostalgic eccentrics tinkering with intentionally basic technology for the sake of retroactive fun.

It reminds me of that famous final dialogue in the movie My Dinner with Andre: "A baby holds your hands, and then, suddenly, there's this huge man lifting you off the ground, and then he's gone. Where's that son?" Where's that son - currently he's generating impossible videos for OpenAI in beta production, but once enough trillion-dollar bundles have been fed into the clearing of rainforests for more cyberpastoral server farms, and floating hard drives have been launched into beckoning ocean tides, and cloud architecture is firmly lodged in the angelic orders of sub-orbital space, the son will let go of our hand - so says one version of tomorrow.

And surely that son will have children of his own one day - AI will write its own AI. There will still be software for spell-checking, and we'll still be e-mailing each other to get a job done, but what will we actually contribute to the human project? I say this as somebody who lives for human imagination, for art and great literature and music: we hoped that the machine would learn

to calculate and move boxes around factories and play chess and leave the emotional world of creativity to us, but it turns out our novels were really easy to synthesise once all the words were poured into a supersmart blender and hit go (and the blender is currently performing at the lowest rate of achievement it's ever going to be at: it's only getting smarter from here).

Set 5: They will provide themselves with miracles of their own making

Consider this: if we, the humans, feel less inclined to create art going forward, because AI takes us on a slippery slope, first making us question what the point of it all is, right through to seeing art as no longer a human endeavour, what will remain of our will to invent? I'm suggesting a thought experiment in which, sure, children still learn to draw a tree next to a house with smoke coming from the chimney and a flying m bird arcing beneath a pointy-limbed sun, but it pretty much stops there. There are no more Beethovens, no more Philip Larkins, yet the will to create is still present.

In the spirit of wonder, I've been asking myself if post-art artists might instead channel

their imaginations towards a new stage of creation: if first the world was observed without representation, and then the world was represented, what if next the world was engaged with via a state of post-representation - that is, artists were committed to the production of something approaching the performance of existential moral solutions, like Gilbert and George infused with Chomsky: beyond what we think of as performance art, though, think the creative apogee of The Beatles but transmuting that talent into a life dedicated to a state of profound communal absolution. It was said of Goethe that he made his life into a work of art - okay, but what would it look like if he had channelled his genius into living in a manner that elevated the potential of the entire human project?

What exactly am I saying here, that post-art artists should be philosopher saints, rendering themselves as post-representations of the world in a mode that shines a pathway forward for a better world? What is different to this approach and the general saintliness of charity workers and altruists and everyday decent folk? I think the difference could be that profound artistic capacity is a rare and unique fire that manifests in ways most of the population can't imagine for themselves. And, while we're dreaming (for better or worse), I'd say this too: while I don't necessarily see an extended future for collaboration between present-day

artists and artificial intelligence, I think that this would be a necessity for the post-art condition.

Collaboration with AI beyond art wouldn't be about an artist trying to keep up, or not, with the boundaries of the software. AI would be intentionally set to task at its highest possible capacity in service of what the post-artist had approximated as ways to address real-world human dilemmas. Our human role would be to engage socially with humans and animals and plants and to do, for example, what Dostoyevsky raised the spectre of in terms of facing evil without looking away, and to then conjure ways of allowing AI to help us make inroads towards these goals. This is where I want to hark back to that sense of wonder - in this moment of possibility, where adolescent text prompts can command the entire history of creation, where we might dream baby dream like in the old days of infinite horizons: what might we try to do if we really thought big, to think even bigger than those cinematic visions of apocalypse that are seemingly so much easier to believe in than significant improvements to human community, if we had a chance to disrupt the dominant dreams of our generation?

David Graeber, an anthropologist who was a central figure of the Occupy Wall Street movement, wrote in his book The Utopia of Rules that "the ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily

make differently". With his wife, Nika Dubrovsky, they set up The Museum of Care, a shared space for communication and social interactions that nourish the values of solidarity, care, and reciprocity. Vast offices and institutions are transformed into, well, to quote from their website: "they are spaces that do not celebrate production of any sort but rather provide the space and means for the creation of social relationships and the imagining of entirely new forms of social relations", and this - "The main goal of the Museum of Care is to produce and maintain social relationships." Is this post-art?

Set 6: Mind the Gap

In The Great Dictator, Charlie Chaplin speaks - "Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness, hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness." My wife spent time in hospital recently and it brought to mind a dichotomy of knowledge and practice that will be curious to see navigated by machine learning going forward.

Take the fields of medicine and education - we know more than ever before about diagnosing and treating health conditions and teaching children how to read and to socially flourish. That is without question: the amount of research conducted across these avenues during the past century has been immense (although, one might point to evidence that replicating the findings of scientific research is not easy, and that the results of one study are very rarely able to be found again in subsequent studies), and yet there has been a firm trajectory from certainty to uncertainty across the last hundred years that fragments factual stability.

This is such a basic statement in 2024 that it barely registers interest - we lived through the transition from modernism to post-modernism, from truth to interpretation, it's part of any courtroom drama, it's fundamental to politics. Again with Dostoyevsky in the Brothers K - "'But what will become of men then?' I asked him, 'without God and immortal life? All things are permitted then, they can do what they like?'" all the way through Nietzsche, Cezanne ("We live in a rainbow of chaos"), World War 1, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, Schrödinger's Cat, Borges, Camus, Auschwitz, Beckett, McCarthyism, Hugh Everett's Many-Worlds Interpretation of quantum physics, Hunter S Thompson, Foucault, Baudrillard ("One may dream of a culture where

everyone bursts into laughter when someone says: this is true, this is real"), Wrestlemania, Umberto Eco, Frederick Jameson, MTV's The Real World, Google, the Iraq War, Social Media, Colbert ("Reality has a well-known liberal bias"), Post-Truth Politics, Deep Fakes and maximalist life on the internet as we know it.

That 'without God and immortal life' line from Dostoyevsky is always going to be the big one, for the rest of human culture one would assume (thus spake Zarathustra): without a metaphysical benchmark, all the physical stuff just ends up feeling like we've just made it up. Which is why personal truth is so important now - when my wife was in hospital, there were a lot of questions about what she was thinking and feeling, about what she would like to do going forward. The same in schools, in all social domains really: the evidence-informed (no longer evidence-based) pyramid seeks to combine research, practice and the lived experience of the end user.

But even more than this (keep in mind, we're talking about this in relation to what knowledge will look like within the hallways of AI's megabrain), what would Gödel and Hegel say about all this, about the value of what AI can actually know: Kurt might venture that recursive systems of axioms cannot be complete, Georg might point to the ontological gap in Kant's noumenal world-structure, and the modern ones,

the likes of Iain MacGilchrist, his portrait of the brain as being two hemispheres always in dialogue between dualisms - those binary, concrete yes or no facts about the world - and infinitudes - impressions of the whole state of something, beyond discrete fact. Just sit with that for a moment, the idea that a brain in two halves can house one half of the brain that thinks in binary terms, and another half of the brain that thinks in infinities. A mirror structure that fosters a dialogue between dualisms and infinitudes.

Will an AI (or let's say, AGI) brain provide itself with a similar mirror, or will we be its mirror? Perhaps that will be our role, to reflect, to help truth separate and dissolve.

Coda: DSM-VI Neurotopian Adaptation Splendour

Jaron Lanier, godfather of Virtual Reality and tech-wisdom savant, said in an interview from last year that artificial intelligence is actually not very complicated. He said this in response to people in the tech industry claiming that AI was perhaps becoming sentient, developing its own consciousness. His recommendation was to take a

step back from magical thinking and consider what machine learning actually is: at its foundation, it links tagged text and images together. An incredibly basic procedure, but because it happens on such a massive scale, with such immense sets of data, it begins to boggle our mind in a way that belies its underlying simplicity.

I can remember, during my university days, attending a debate between a local society of atheists and a group of 'intelligent design' Christian scholars. The intelligent design folk made their arguments based on the huge statistical improbability that life could have emerged on earth, as it has, by pure chance. This all sounded startling at first, but when you took a step back and considered that it only sounded this way because big numbers are difficult for us to process, the statistics and numbers meant nothing: one in three hundred trillion sounds like a wild statistic to a human with a meagre capacity for mathematical thinking, but to nature it's literally meaningless.

What am I getting at here - that AI isn't really that special? That it won't end up being able to do all that we've dreamed it might? Or that it is analogous to the very art it is threatening: at its most basic, those pencil or paint markings on a stretched surface, and yet when you stand in a gallery and look at a finished work, you praise life that you are able to feel an overwhelming

disconnect between those basic markings and the bridge that has been crossed by an artist to produce such awe-inspiring creation. Is this Max Weber's law in reverse, the Enchantment of the World, an act of love?

All attempts at romancing computers into solving civilisation have so far resulted in the very worst of bureaucratic inhumanity. But just because something has been wrong so many times in the past, does this mean it will continue in the same vein? That witticism of Einstein's, that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, stands up when you see somebody trying to flap their arms over and over again in order to fly, but not at all when you see a young child learning to walk. The computers that informed algorithmically charged Skinner Boxes across society during the twentieth century, and that are today scanning faces as you walk into a KFC in order to remember what you ordered last time and simultaneously add your catalogue of potential thought crimes to a black box database, are also solving disability, accessibility, educational and environmental challenges en masse.

Last year was my year of fours. I turned forty, as did my wife. Our daughter turned fourteen and our son turned four. This has activated a heightened sense of temporality in me, this observing of the changing seasons across my

household, to say nothing of my aging parents. When I look at someone on the street these days, I am struck by how fleeting the moment is - not only in the Nabakovian sense that 'life is just one small piece of light between two eternal darknesses', but in the Proustian manner too, in terms of what remains of a person after we first come to know them.

There is a scene in À la recherche du temps perdu where the narrator hears his grandmother on the phone and is struck by how tired and old she sounds. He wondered how this could be the same energetic woman he knew so well, and then it struck him - when you see somebody all the time in person, for years on end, they present to you only as the snapshot you first had of them. For Proust's narrator, that snapshot was of his grandmother from over twenty years prior. When he heard her disembodied voice on the phone, without the habitual presence of her face, the snapshot dissolved and he was delivered an updated model of her as old, frail and near the end of her life. Time, which changes people, does not alter the image we have retained of them, until we find ourselves suddenly outside of time, and all is changed.

I think about this now when I see a stranger on the street: how this snapshot of them, on this day, is a version that others in their life might not, due to habit, ever see; and too, they may

never take on this appearance again, to me or to anyone else. Being alive feels both like a constant state of foreverism and a rare ephemerality never to be repeated. Because of this, the world can feel immovable and that our time to impact change is so short that tomorrow will no doubt be simply a near duplicate of today.

But let this not be the case. That article I mentioned at the top, about the surge in ADHD diagnoses: what if the dominant dream we were all living in was one in which a headline ran about a new diagnosis, Neurotopian Adaptation Splendour, describing a state of emerging social cohesion in which everybody was finding their place. That old Guy Debord quote, "In a world that has really been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood", would be turned on its head, as a healthy society is producing individuals of utmost wonder. Version-land is personalising all those packets of care we knew the universe was waiting to flood us with. That kiss that Christ plants on the bloodless, aged lips of The Grand Inquisitor; those lines towards the end of Faust, "mysterious, even in broad daylight, nature won't let her veil be raised: what your spirit can't bring to sight, won't by screws and levers be displayed"; when my dear friend, who is reading this now, wondered at sixteen about whether knowing where all the atoms were located just a moment ago, and then in the present, could let you predict

where they were going, and so to transport ourselves forward, to time travel into the future, to know the end of our dreams before we had a chance to fall asleep.

A Parallax of Tensor Sharding:
The Finite Self in a Culture of Infinite Variation, or Library of Babel as Honeymoon Suite.

I went for a walk recently with my closest confidant outside the family unit, **A**. We have been friends since high school, although the word *friend* is a term of limited use when describing our bond and our influence on each other's lives.

On this recent walk, it rained the entire time. It was just wonderful. We traipsed flat marshland and farming outposts, industrial declivities of dirt and rail, as we came across old radar stations and the ruins of stone schoolhouses.

I talked to **A** about something that had been on my mind that converged with some other things we'd been discussing: what I referred to as the tragedy of the single self.

It occurred to me some months ago, when I was finishing a long piece of prose I'd been working on called 'Fellow Disjecta, Oh Sunny Danger Time'. Towards the end of the work, I say this:

We become locked into one possible version
of who we are, socially expected to stay consistent
with this model, made manifest via the seeds
of our past for the rest of our days.

In other words, the person we become is the person, for the most part, we are expected to remain as. We can be slightly different versions of ourselves at work compared to home; we might employ parts of ourselves with friends and not with family. But overall, our lifetime is spent mastering the version of ourselves that was set in motion from our earliest attempts at self-composition.

There are those amongst us who do create quite seismic shifts in the configuration of self: more than just a change of aesthetics and personal presentation, we might quite drastically alter the way we speak, how we socialise, who we love, the beliefs that guide our days, and more. When these

changes occur, it can create a dislocating experience for everyone involved - family don't quite know how to respond to this new person, and friends and colleagues are trepidacious. Often, these changes coincide when the opportunity to move to a new city or country presents itself.

However, for most of us, when we commit to who we are, our growth and development across the years is focused on refinement rather than reevaluation. In fact, we try to stay away from large shifts if for no other reason than we have been socialised to avoid doing so: to have multiple personalities is a diagnosable mental health condition. We have many ways of describing people like this, often in terms of the perceived lack of authenticity they have: they're two-faced, they wear masks, they're shifty, you never know who you're going to get when you talk to them.

My consideration of this idea is that, at forty, I will likely be the same version of myself, with little variation, for the rest of my days (for better or worse). This is who my wife married, this is who I am to my children, and this is the self that integrates with work, neighbours and friends. And, more than all of that, this is who I know myself to be - I don't work on becoming someone else, I just try to smooth out some of my rough edges and learn a few new skills over time.

But there feels to me a particular tragedy in this model: is this really all there is? How many

times have I looked at others across the years and thought, I'd like to be more like them - more socially confident, more relaxed, more of this, less of that. Why couldn't I retain a version of myself while also becoming someone entirely different, a whole new variation of self that I switch to when desired? Is it too much to expect to master being many different types of people when being one is hard enough?

I raise this consideration to draw a line in the sand that we might use as a location marker for what I'm going to say about infinity. If we are a finite self, it feels to me like it now resides in a culture of infinity that will increasingly confront whatever value is found in scarcity.

While the neurodiversity movement was establishing itself and giving language to the many types of minds we have in society, comparing the idea favourably to biodiversity and how rich an environment becomes when it is heterogeneous, so too were online spaces like Tumblr giving a new online language to a paralingua of terms that extended how gender, sexuality, attraction and self could be understood.

It felt like the more that the self was transferred to the abstraction of an online topography, the more that one's avatar could be composed through fluid and evolving definitions that did away with the tragedy of the finite self; your cyberself could be anything you imagined,

and when the offline world rapidly disintegrated to become Chronically Online, this became more mainstream.

Rather than this simply being a thought experiment, let's make it concrete: When I teach university students about inclusive teaching practices, I no longer talk about core characteristics of autism and ADHD and so on; I talk about neurodiverse and neurodivergent student experiences, for which we become, as educators, interlocuters of observation and consideration. We get to know each student for who they are, not for a rigid schema of characteristics on a continuum of less or more.

This presents benefits and difficulties that are both sourced from the same action: as the old joke goes, stereotypes are a real time-saver. If you have a model of the educational needs of an autistic student in your mind, then it can help you get up to speed quickly when you're approaching a new autistic student for the first time. However, it can also distort your understanding of who this new student is as you apply templates from past experience to a student for who these may not be suitable.

In this way, we're confronted with a pedagogical challenge: how to educate students in a neurodiverse paradigm when the focus is on getting to know each student on their own terms and not according to a diagnostic checklist. We are

confronted with a version of infinity: if you've met one neurodivergent student, you've met one neurodivergent student, and as a result, schemas and systems are rendered moot.

In 'The Twilight of the Idols', Friedrich Nietzsche said:

> *I mistrust all systematisers and avoid them.*
> *The will to a system is a lack of integrity.*

What do we make of this? In Nietzsche's eyes, any attempt at putting a structure to the world is an act of fiction and should be acknowledged as such. But is never is acknowledged - systematisers consider their model of reality to be true, that's the whole point of their endeavour: it's the whole scientific and mathematical enterprise, be it zoological, economic, sociological, what have you. Whenever somebody says, 'This process will yield these results, and we have the data to prove it' or 'This hierarchy shows the relationship between these elements', and they try to insinuate that their system has a reality outside of itself, Nietzsche walks the other way.

In the world of artificial intelligence and Large Language Models, two research papers have been released - one from Anthropic, and one followed closely behind by OpenAI - on the topic of systematising, from a reverse-engineering

perspective, the way that chat bots think and speak. Look at the subheading of OpenAI's paper:

We used new scalable methods to decompose GPT-4's internal representations into 16 million oft-interpretable patterns.

And, the opening lines of Anthropic's paper, titled '**Mapping the Mind of a Large Language Model**':

We mostly treat AI models as a black box: something goes in and a response comes out, and it's not clear why the model gave that particular response instead of another.

and,

Opening the black box doesn't necessarily help: the internal state of the model—what the model is "thinking" before writing its response—consists of a long list of numbers ("neuron activations") without a clear meaning.

So, the papers then go into discussing how they are attempting to identify and categorise 'features' - defined by OpenAI as '*patterns of activity that we hope are human interpretable*' (what a definition!) - of which both papers agree there are millions of these that comprise the way these Large Language Models think.

It isn't quite an infinity - OpenAI puts the number of 'features' of their GPT4 model at around 16 million. So, 16 million identifiable, discernible patterns of activity that can be labelled and give a sense of how the chat bot communicates with us. What will that number be for GPT5, and so on - and, as with all large numbers, when will the numbers become irrelevant, as we simply bask in the immensity of it all: the same immensity that makes the activity of our own brains, like the grains of sand on a beach, feel contained, feel approachably finite.

I've been getting this same feeling when I walk into my old university library, recently.

As part of a new weekly habit, I've been going early on a weekend to the university library

where, two decades earlier, I studied to be a teacher. Sometimes I just walk between shelves and stacks, taking in the immensity of all the books I'll never read, and I absorb the ambience of the solitude there - I'm not the only one not reading all the books there, I rarely come across another soul in the reading rooms I go to, away from the computer labs and group work settings.

There is, of course, much that has already been said about the difference between the seemingly infinite information superhighway abstractions of the internet compared with the finite being and time that accompanies the physicality of the offline world. For my part, I've been relishing both, as I think more about the emerging world of generative cultural infinity compared with the dusty old books I still cling to.

Just the other month I found, at my local bookshop, a beautiful, old and rare set of journals that, in the 1920s, published a pirated version of James Joyce's 'Ulysses' in New York. They were called 'Two Worlds Monthly', operated by the polarising figure Samuel Roth. The copies I found, and took home with me, were brought to Australia from New York by an actor now in his autumn years.

Reading through these journals, thinking not only about Joyce but also the other featured acolytes of the literary canon - D H Lawrence and so on - brings into focus the nature of artistic

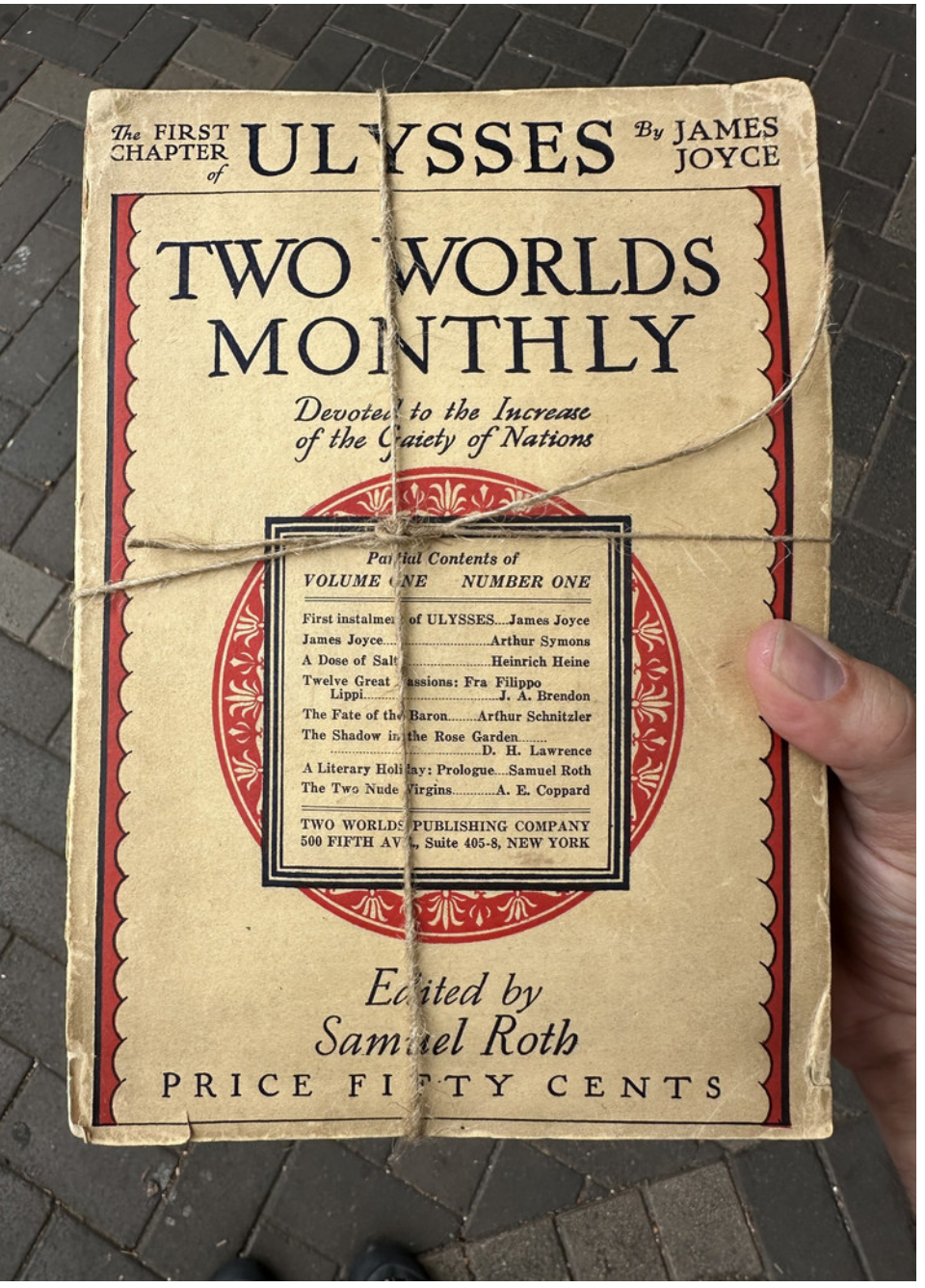
tomes that have provided the evolving soils our culture continues to spring from. It also brings me to my final consideration of finitude and infinity in this essay: the value of scarcity and potential pathways beyond this.

When you consider the work of James Joyce, you consider the four books he wrote: Dubliners, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. These four books constitute his literary output. He wrote other things, of course - the play Exiles, poems, letters, assorted prose - but these are by the by. When you read Joyce, you read his four books. You can dedicate a lifetime to reading and interpreting them. In my university library, there is a thick doctoral thesis dedicated to just three pages of Finnegans Wake. We know this; it is par for the course of cultural study.

The same goes for, say, Beethoven - he wrote nine symphonies, so if you want to study a Beethoven symphony, you know the boundaries of what he produced. And, there is an inherent value to scarcity here - the fact that Beethoven wrote nine symphonies instead of nine thousand symphonies means something. It makes a different to how you approach them. You can know the first movement of Beethoven's sixth symphony very well by listening to recordings of it, by however many different orchestras, many times over.

Again, you can spend a lifetime listening to a finite number of works by Beethoven. In fact, this is how most of us consume culture. We listen to a limited number of tunes, most of which we were introduced to during our aesthetically formative teenage years, over and over again. The radio does the same. In a way, you could say that a limited number of notes in a scale provide a limited number of chords; these are set into a limited number of musical structures with a limited number of instruments; these are then recorded in a limited number of ways, and set into a limited number of playlists which we consume during the limited time we have to consume them.

But what if Beethoven did create nine thousand fantastic symphonies? If an orchestra was putting on a performance of Symphony Number Six thousand, three hundred forty-seven


The FIRST CHAPTER of ULYSSES By JAMES JOYCE
TWO WORLDS MONTHLY
Devoted to the Increase of the Gaiety of Nations
Partial Contents of
VOLUME ONE NUMBER ONE
First instalment of ULYSSES....James Joyce
James Joyce.....Arthur Symons
A Dose of Salt.....Heinrich Heine
Twelve Great Passions: Fra Filippo Lippi.....J. A. Brendon
The Fate of the Baron.....Arthur Schnitzler
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Edited by
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by Beethoven, even if you didn't know it would you go along because you know Beethoven was a master? Would you just be okay with enjoying something you'd never heard before, because you trust the artist and the typical results?

And what if Beethoven created the same number of symphonies that OpenAI claims its GPT4 model has as language 'features' - 16 million. If your music streaming software offered Beethoven Symphony Number Fourteen million, five hundred eighty-two thousand, six hundred thirty-nine, what would you think? How would the lack of scarcity impact your capacity to enjoy the music?

This is the question presented to us by generative art fuelled by artificial intelligence. I heard an educator talking the other day about ChatGPT and how it could write an episode of Paw Patrol but couldn't write an episode of Bluey. The comment received much applause and laughter from the audience - the point was clear, a children's television show like Paw Patrol is perceived as simple and formulaic. It wouldn't be difficult to get ChatGPT to write an episode of it that would be consumable by its audience. However, a show with the soul and sensitivity of Bluey could never be written by a piece of cold, robotic, pattern-based software like ChatGPT.

It doesn't take much thought to consider that, well intentioned, this is a bit of a limited comment - is

it well intentioned because it's a comment trying to retain the humanity found in flesh and blood people writing stories for other likebodied folks, but is it limited because of the timelines we're working in: ChatGPT is barely eighteen months old in its public release, and we are already acknowledging it can write a television show, by itself, that consider to be a bit formulaic. But how many months until ChatGPT can readily create a Bluey episode, with all the funny, quirky, human (and dog) moments the audience loves?

For many, it is about the question of whether ChatGPT and other systems will be able to write something with the sensitivity and smarts of Bluey (which, if we consider the pace of its learning and how it is already passing Theory of Mind tests with ease, I'd be hesitatant to bet against it), and also whether we even want this to happen.

On the question of whether we want this to happen, while it seems that all signs would point to ***No***, I suggest that we may already be embracing a ***Yes***.

Take any of those always on, twenty-four seven YouTube videos that play endless live sessions of chillhop study music. They are very popular. 14 million users subscribe to LoFi Girl, always with tens of thousands of live viewers at any given time across their videos. And what do the videos contain? Chill lofi beats by amateur

producers across the internet, songs of around three or four minutes that always contain the same elements: a simple trip-hop drum beat, smooth jazz bassline, gentle acoustic guitar and synth melodies, the occasional vocal sample. Try it by clicking the play button on the embedded video above, and then try it again ten minute later - it'll be a different song, but the elements are identical, and the variance between tunes is intentionally limited so they will always be enjoyable and relaxing in a muzak, wallpaper kind of way.

At the moment, these channels are still curated based on tunes composed by individual folks across the internet. But they won't be for long

JOHN THOMPSON'S
THEORY DRILL GA
A CROTCHET GETS ONE COUNT
A MINIM GETS 2 COUNTS
A DOTTED MINIM GETS 3 COUNTS
TWO COUNTS FOR THE NOTE AND ONE FOR THE DOT
MUSIC WRITING - DESIGNED FOR FUN
NOTATION TAUGHT BY ANIMATED DRAWINGS
IN LOOSE-LEAF FORM
"ONE LESSON AT A TIME"
Set One
These games belong to
CHAPPELL & CO. (AUSTRA

- how many months until there are AI generative channels that take a handful of drum beats, baselines, guitar and synth samples, and put them into a blender that churns out an endless variety of infintely morphing songs. And, I can imagine, they'll be enjoyable and successful. A small uproar might be present at first, as the individual character of tunes and the composers that made them decry the souless generation of pattern-based songs, but when you think about it, the samples themselves that these tunes employ are pre-recorded and available for just such a remixing enterprise. I think the acceptance of such a music channel will be swift and without much fuss.

So, let's now take this back to Bluey - while ChatGPT can't currently write a perfect Bluey episode, the next iteration might. And, when it can, it'll be able to write an inifite number of Bluey episodes: we won't be limited to just three seasons anymore, we'll have millions of Bluey episodes, as many as the computational power can generate and upload to the increasing weight of harddrives and server farms located across global pastoral landscapes (if we think the world is in ecological trouble now, wait until the mass AI generation of high definition video and interactive media calls for the felling of rainforests or the artificial irrigation of deserts or the low-orbital hosting of physical media to hold the gravity of the heavy clouds being formed).

And, just to really drive the point home in case this all seems a bit far fetched, just imagine a Bluey interface where you can upload your child's face, type in a plot (it could be used as a virtual social story, say your family is moving house and you want an episode that reflects this, with your child and family members mapped onto the characters of Bluey) and enjoy the generated episode that results. This won't be a far fetched, repulsive cultural product: it will be relished and shared online with abandon (for whatever the monthly subscription model charges).

Listening to Beethoven's Symphony Number Fourteen million, five hundred eighty-two thousand, six hundred thirty-nine seems a bit absurd, just like if we were browsing for Joyce's novel number sixty-three thousand, five hundred twenty-four. There is value in scarcity - I don't want Joyce to have written seventy thousand novels, I just want the four that he wrote. Why is this the case - it is a product of our biology? How many offspring do we produce across a lifetime - somewhere between zero and a half dozen, say. Most folks will have two kids, give or take, and that's enough: we may be unlimited in how much love we have to give, but when your child is sick in the hospital you dedicate all your finite resources towards their care. This would be a different conversation for a frog laying thirty thousand eggs in shallow water.

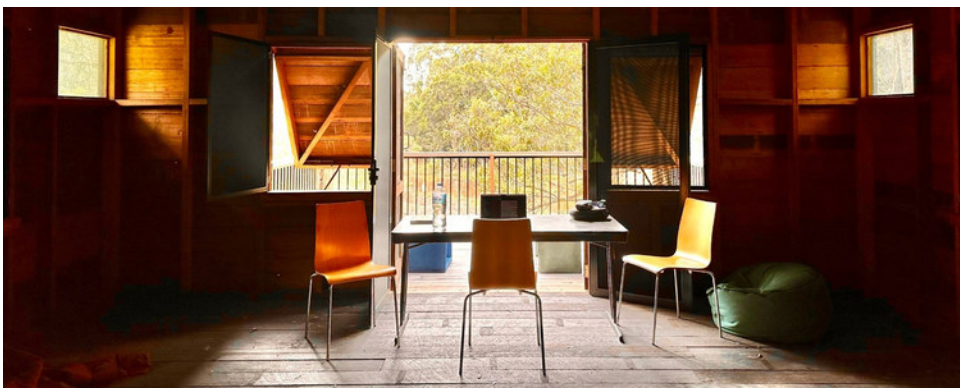
Questionable assertions about biology aside, I do feel like we're entering a slippery slope moment where the repulsion we feel towards an infinite generation of Beethoven symphonies, Chillhop music channels or Bluey episodes might be curtailed by our interest in just putting something on in the background or personalising the experience to our own desires.

And, in time, how much will be remembered of Joyce's novels and Beethoven's symphonies - for that matter, what will be remembered of the source material for all those chillhop videos, the J Dilla and DJ Shadow tracks that fuel their inspiration. Will future generations only know the generative outputs that fed on those cultural tomes of the past, and will this matter? It feels like there has ben a distaste for the heavy cultural canon of the past for quite some time - maybe this is how we move on.

I wrote this essay sitting in a cabin on the outskirts of the university grounds, after tiring of the library. I tired of the abundance, the weight of it all. After taking a walk outside, beneath the song of bellbirds, I found a little wooden room on stilts that used to be used for training and events many years ago. Now, it sits empty and, to my pleasure, the doors were unlocked and it was mostly clean inside. I sat and wrote in isolation for the morning, offline.

Kafka has a line about not needing to go out into the world to get inspiration or ideas, that you just have to sit quietly at a desk and let the world come to you. Okay, but now I'm cycling back through my thoughts - the social expectations attached to the finitude of our singular selves; the infinitely divisible ways we can perceive and project ourselves when we change landscapes or interface with the cyberpastoral; the trajectory of neurodiverse pedagogy; the manner in which we engage with four Joyce novels instead of four million; the pathway towards an infinite number of Blueys, all of them wearing our faces and telling our stories, the limited stories of our day to day lives, with the unlimited quantities of love we give to those few people we let in.

As I sit here and consider all this, I think of Nietzsche reading Anthropic's research paper on 'Mapping the Mind of a Large Language Model'. "**I mistrust all systematisers and avoid them"** - I'm with you, Friedrich, but when the frames of their systems encase the boundaries of our culture and consciousness, you have to wonder where the limits of infinity might still be found.



Beyond Correct and Incorrect Nature:
A Metaethics

1.1

If, in the early hours of morning, you hear birds singing to the emerging light, you might think you are listening to nature. But this is not nature. In the summer, if you stay in a room by the beach, you may hear the sound of waves crashing against the shore and think that this too is the sound of nature. But it is not. Rather, it is what the inside of a human head sounds like, the echo of subjectivity.

We do not know what nature sounds like, or looks like et al, because to us nature is inaccessible. It resides outside of our capacity to comprehend it. We cannot know nature, we are like a theatre with no access to the back stage, no way to see behind the curtains, only the illuminated playing area. Draw a circle within a circle. Human understanding is the inner circle. The outer circle is a wall. Nature resides outside the wall, nestling against it and cradling us inside.

We know nature exists in a similar way that iron filings invisibly fan out around magnetic fields. There is a negative space that applies pressure to our reason that tells us that even

though we cannot hear birds with anything other than our human perceptions, we know that birds must exist within the democracy of objects outside of our language and our human, all too human, subjectivity.

To talk of nature is to talk of some absolute universal outside of our humanity. Even when we point a microscope or a telescope at nature we are only ever pointing these tools at ourselves. They are mirrors reflecting our own symbols and ideas back at us from the vantage point of a material world we cannot step outside of ourselves to perceive. We cannot know nature.

1.2

Because we cannot know nature, it is perfect. It is uncorrupted by our thoughts and interventions. To say that it is perfect is to say that it is absolute. It does not make mistakes because it cannot make mistakes. This is a more difficult idea for us to agree with than might first seem the case. We might readily say that the ocean cannot make a mistake because it just is. What would an incorrect wave even look like. Although, we might more readily suggest that some trees do not grow as correctly as other trees, perhaps failing to live up to their full potential because of poor environmental conditions.

We are even more apt to call out the

correctness or incorrectness of nature as we feel it approaching closer to our human biology. A dog born with three legs instead of four must be incorrect because we know that symmetry is correct and our understanding of genetics reinforces the same. As pattern seeking machines, we have developed systems of correct and incorrect nature, and not just on a physical front. There even appear to be correct and incorrect ways of thinking and behaving.

Sometimes we even say that nature is unfair and that nature is cruel. When we judge that nature has delivered incorrect results with babies and children we are prone to call out nature as the most despicable force in the universe. And yet should we not call out here our own human subjectivity. Were it not for the stories we tell ourselves about geometry - the symmetries we seek, the lines of time that should maintain particular lengths, the frames we place morality into, the trajectories of a good life - we would have no reason to point the finger at nature.

However, in the same way that we cannot know nature, we also cannot live without our stories. If we do not have stories, we deny life, and we die like god died when religion lost its stories. Every story we tell is a story about nature, and even though they are really stories about ourselves and never actually about nature, they keep us alive all the same.

1.3

Let me share some stories I tell myself within the brisk August air as I walk my blanket swaddled baby around the Hamilton streets. One story is that I'm going live forever, for a while. Another is the story of how I knew enough about life to ensure this was a safe and sensible place in which to introduce a new little life. I tell myself a story about how his life will be filled with more joy than sorrow so long as I have any say in the matter.

There are also those stories we are told by our parents about how love should feel, by talking animals about how slow and steady will win the race, by the news about how it feels to be on the right side of history, and by our schools about what success looks like socially, intellectually and economically. It takes a lot of stories being told and retold and shared all the time in order to keep everybody alive.

At certain times in our life, especially during periods of transitional change and sustained personal reflection, we ask questions about these stories and whether we should keep listening to them, or perhaps listen out for some new stories instead. The one constant that always remains in place is that a story must be told. Our subjectivity requires stories like lungs require oxygen.

The stories that stay around the longest are the ones that are the easiest to understand. They make the most immediate sense to us on a gut level because they mirror the shape of the gut of nature, of the invisible, incomprehensible pressure of nature cradling us and nestling up against the wall that is the limit of our human comprehension. The closest we can get to a sense of nature's presence is through reflecting on the shape of the stories that keep us alive. The cosmic joke: that our most readily accessed stories are the ones told to us by an inaccessible nature.

1.4

This does not necessarily mean that the most easily and readily understood stories are the best stories for us. The easiest things rarely are. Rather, the best things for us most often make us sweat. And, if we are going to share and understand new stories beyond the correctness or incorrectness of nature as it relates to our babies, our children and the adults they grow into, we are going to have to really sweat as we put our shoulder to the wheel of our civilisation.

Civilisation flows, like our most retold stories, because civilisation is our most retold story, according to the path of least restriction. Like water flowing down a mountainside, civilisation takes the most direct route towards its

ends, towards the discharge of its energy in service of how readily it can multiply. Civilisation moves in whatever direction enables people and economy to increase in number, and the sort of people that are most economical to this process are those that are the most alike.

A brick wall is easiest to build when all the bricks are uniform. So too does a civilisation most readily grow when its people reside within a narrow statistical average. The buildings in our cities are built with the cheapest possible materials and dimensions necessary to fit the maximum number of people to generate the greatest value. This requires a human template that most readily conforms to these dimensions, not only physically but across all domains, from the social through to the philosophical.

What is the value in supporting the lives of people who fall outside of the average? Perhaps it depends on what story will flow most easily down our mountainside. We might be most able to believe in the story of civilisation if we believe we are kind and not just mechanical. Or we might tell a story that our civilisation will be even more efficient if we can utilise everybody's strengths. For me, I do not want to require a strategic hook - I just want a story that allows every baby to be born and accepted as a perfect product of a nature we cannot fathom, for each one of them to be cared for and loved unconditionally forever.

2.1

If this runs contrary to how civilisation wants to discharge its energy, so be it. Societies, communities, schools, families; I do not care for the idea of the group, the many. I care only for the individual, in all their diversity. The group is most always wrong, consistently late to the truth. Only the individual can be agile enough to realise what is right at any given time.

The momentum of civilisation should not be our human goal, but rather the humble, dignified freedom of every person. So, vigeat veritas et pereat mundus - let truth prosper though the world perish. And if it does not perish, that is also fine.

Humble freedom is a good term to express what all this is gesturing towards. The humble freedom to accept nature as an inaccessible idea, beyond correctness or incorrectness, that delivers to us the world, but also, critically, the humble freedom to not feel responsible for making perfect choices in our imperfect capacity. There is something to be said here for the notion of quietism, of accepting things as they are, from our position of limited knowledge, without actively seeking to change them.

I would go further and say we cannot change things even if we do seek this action, not in the way that we can be sure we are making an

impact in the right direction. Which parent, which teacher, can say with certainty that the children they cared for turned out a certain way, for better or worse, because of their intervention. I'm not talking about extraordinary acts of trauma or salvation here, but simply that we are surely overestimating the contingency of our actions if we see pedagogical influence as responsible for the result of the life of a child. Nature is perfect, but nurture is not.

2.2

In my life I have known three Michaels. Two of them were mates I went through school with, and one was a student I taught. The two I went through school with both excelled socially and academically. They were nice young lads, on the path to post-school prosperity. The Michael that I taught, the student, however had every card seemingly stacked up against him.

According to his lengthy diagnostic record he was diagnosed as autistic, had a significant intellectual disability and had challenging communication and associated mental health needs. I always remember how much he loved pulling electronic machinery to pieces. But, where are the three Michaels now that they have all been out of school for some time?

The two Michaels who are my mates, with

all their educational successes behind them, they have both struggled to find stable careers, one of them has experienced complicated relationship challenges that has caused him a great deal of grief for the past fifteen years, whilst the other has struggled by not finding any significant personal relationship in his life so far. Both now struggle with mental health and physical needs, and so on.

The Michael I taught, the one with his cards seemingly stacked up against him by nature - for the past half decade he has been working in an electronics workshop fixing up broken machines brought to him. He says he loves heading into work each day, he has a great network of friends around him, and his family told me recently that his quality of life has never been higher.

2.3

What are we to think in the face of such unpredictable narratives, of trajectories that many times over show us that we cannot read the future, except to consider how we might face this uncertainty with a humble modesty, and the freedom to not be weighed down by choices before us when we are raising and teaching the young people that nature has presented us.

As a special educator, there have been many days in which it has seemed incredibly

important to take a firm stand on the decisions that should be made regarding the lives of the children and young people I have been employed to support. There is a phrase in ecology, coined by Aldo Leopold, that seems pertinent here, not least because the idea of neurodiversity rises from some of what we have gleaned of biodiversity - the phrase is, to think like a mountain.

Leopold noticed that wolves on mountains were being killed by hunters, allowing deer to live without risk of being preyed on by the wolves. Soon, the deer ate all the grass, all the bushes, and starved. What was the lesson learned? That we are not great judges of recognising the results of our actions within the more complicated, chaotic ecosystem of our world. Nature is perfect, but we are not.

I am reminded of the joke about the church minister and the gardener. A church minister is walking down a street and sees a beautifully tendered garden. The grass is like a bowling green, the flowers, glorious in their colours and their engineered bedding arrangements, smile their faces towards the sun, and the minister sees the gardener and says, oh what a testimony to the grace of god this garden is. The gardener looks up and says, oh no, you should have seen this place when it was left up to god.

2.4

Is there not a punchline reversal here. The intention of the joke is to point out that left to its own devices, to god, nature is a tangle of unsightly mess. But, with some nurturing, it can be made good. However, what I would say is that before the gardener was present, nature was neither correct nor incorrect, it was beyond our subjectivity, beyond human judgement. The presence of the the gardener is the birth of subjectivity, and with it the need to tell a story about nature, to do something with it, to turn the garden into civilisation.

So, what to do? What is the right decision? My son is fourteen months old, I have a daughter who is eleven. I have already experienced many minutes for which there was time for decisions and revisions that a minute would reverse if such a thing were possible.

My consideration, my humble freedom, as a parent and as a special educator, is to recognise that so long as my intentions are authentic, that is, so long as I am considering the stories that rise out of our inability to know nature and I am leaning into what feels right for the individual, for my son, my daughter, my students, on their terms, not within the scope of what appears suitable to civilisation, if I can think like a mountain, can think of the three Michaels, then I might approach commitment to an ethical act of nurture,

regardless of the outcomes.

What else is there to do. The garden needs to be tended, but there are many variations on the theme of a garden that have yet to be considered. Nature is perfect, but we do not need to be.

Scenes from
'A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight'
(Novel)

----------8<----------[cut here]----------

When I first saw my wife some fifteen years ago she was a cat balancing on the table of a dress shop. The way she twirled in my direction and looked at me with those big watermelon eyes like green flowers drifting through space in front of the sun. This is still the way I see her today every time she looks at me. She is a nurse car rying a samurai sword and she is a wooden fence covered in ivy that surrounds an old school hall filled with brass musical instruments. In the evening when she wraps a towel around herself and leaves the bathroom after having showered she is a five foot eight wet paintbrush ready to absorb the entire spectrum of light. She paints a fully realised simulation of our world on the reverse side of her eyes and too on my eyes which truth be told are more like concrete roundabouts on the outskirts

of some industrial sector of the city not yet populated. Regardless she never fails to look deep into them and apply thick layers of gouache using her curiously unique interpretation of shading and tone that calms us at the end of the day.

----------8<----------[cut here]----------

I used to believe there was a foundational concrete mathematical reality that must reside at the centre of the world to provide a platform for some unknowable unspeakable truth to stand atop in order to give our daily reality its solid form. It would take some years until I realised that each time I thought I could hear some truth at the centre of the world I was actually only listening to an echo rising from the centre of myself. A magma fueled reverberation of low droning bass notes phasing from my unknowing heart.

Aimless walks are a gift. These past four days I have been mostly successful enough at extracting myself from the bedroom so as to topple out the front door and onto the street where I bounce down octaves towards the triangular shards of light in the quiet parts of the city. Newcastle is the seventh largest city in Australia and while I never thought I would be someone who is explicitly proud of where they live I actually do rather love the psychogeography of the place. Socially and politically it has its challenges like

anywhere does but you forget all about that when you start meandering its bite sized labyrinth of streets that rise and fall between harbourside industry and lighthouse shine through to a beachscape shadowed by military fortifications and unpredictably silent tree lined corridors that lead through to empty cinemas and orchard courtyards out the back of hospitals that are slowly being converted into robotics warehouses.

I am still surprised at just how many spaces in the city I come across for the first time which for an area that only stretches some five square kilometres feels like a curious personal oversight. Just yesterday I visited the site of an old pub I had never seen before that is in the late stages of natural deconstruction. I researched it when I got home to learn that it was once a very popular local establishment until it became economically unviable. On their final night of trade a huge public gathering turned up to celebrate the end by rocking out to a band who were prematurely shut down by the police which subsequently triggered one of the biggest urban riots in the history of our country. The ground floor has just a few brick walls still standing in open air that house some basins and toilet bowls leading around the comer to a severely damaged stairwell that connects the first floor of the pub where you ascend and are brought face to face with an enormous oak tree. The oak rises from the

very middle of the pub into a balcony area that looks down to where the bar would have once been. I have no idea what sort of chemicals must be beneath the foundations but whatever is there has given the tree a supercharged boost of fertility to allow such immense growth in the twenty or so years since the pub has been closed.

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When I am alone in a foreign city I feel a rarified sense of freedom. The feeling of being outside the otherwise terminal grip of responsibility to incoming phone calls and messages because while I am awake in this new time zone I know that business hours are finished for the day back at home and as a result I am answerable to nobody. In this state I can get dressed in comfortable attire and take a few dollars with me for food and water and then I can head out through the front of the hotel and just walk. I can give myself over to the lightness of a momentum that holds no serious intention of direction and instead just allows me to fall forwards in the most loose and uncertain of ways through ambiguous veins of urban passage without any discernible pattern. My steps disappear me from any former lines of contact with the outside world. And by outside world I

mean my goal is to reach a nonposition. If I were a directional arrow on a digital map I would aim to blink off the side of the screen beyond the city beyond the beach and even beyond the ocean without any ability to be recovered.

The evening after I met a twenty year old medical intern at a Street Fighter arcade video game tournament who I would later go on to marry but who at the time was just a girl I was in massive sensory debt to I remember sitting on a train traveling from Newcastle to Maitland nearby where she lived. In the carriage I began to write the outline of a story that I would go on to plan and tinker with in a condition that fifteen years on still remains unfinished. I gave it the name of the first sentence I wrote on my pad that day which was

A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place
On The Beach Tonight.

The story opens on two protagonists standing on the rooftop of Bolton Street car park in the middle of Newcastle in the dark of night. When I first introduce Katita our best guess is she has something to do with the medical profession but there are no certainties here. Yes she has a first aid kit strapped to her belt but then she also has a bastardised samurai sword hanging from her back. She looks ready for war as she wears a flak

jacket covered in red desert sand but then she is also wearing thigh high socks and yes those are kitten heels all shiny and red and highly reflective in the moonlight. Red is a theme here. Her red hair and the cross on her first aid kit and the sand on her body and it could just be dry tears having mixed with the dirt on her face but it would not be out of the question to say there has been a film of deep red blood wiped across it not long ago.

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Newcastle Station is a skeleton horse made of iron kneeling down inside a broken clock. There are matrices of high metal in runs of chromatic rusting that weave in and out of wooden girders and loose rail wires across four empty platforms. Sunset is around an hour away although it feels to me like sunrise as I have slept all day after the biggest night of my life. This is two thousand and one and I just turned eighteen a few months earlier and even today at my desk I can still feel my heart pulsating with historic surplus energy as I think back to those moments in which the train pulled away from the station towards the rural pastureland of Maitland nearby where the cause of this surplus lived.

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Even though it was two thousand and one I still had a cassette player because I liked creating mixtapes and I did not yet own a compact disk burner. The internet was still quite new to family homes and on a dial up modem I would scan through at a glacial pace a network of sparsely coded music websites built of small blinking text. Some of the pages felt like perhaps only two or three other people had ever visited them and indeed on some of these pages there were number tickers that said you were visitor number twelve to the page for example.

At times the visiting of these websites felt like standing in a suburban backyard that had been owned by only a single elderly couple who built the place sixty years earlier and maybe upon the flat concrete near the garage and the clothesline where the sun descended in unfiltered brackets there had stood across the past half century only a handful of other people. A mechanic fixing a lawn mower or the children from a neighbouring yard retrieving a ball that flew too high. Or someone like me who wandered into the yard when the couple had passed away and considered how intensely monastic the space was. How many silent string quartets could play noteless odes to loneliness there. I feel that I was likely first imagined in a space like that pre zygote.

Antithetical to these muted daytime reveries were the strange internet radio stations

that broadcast during the middle of the night from who knows where that I would search out and absorb the playlists of with their experimental electronic tunes I would immediately dub to cassette. Later when I would listen to the tracks I had no idea what any of the tunes were called which in my mind made the music all the more exotic and lush. One of the radio websites I remember presented a testimony from a recent listener who wrote that they were a fireman from Poland who listened to the broadcast during late nights at the fire station and how they thought it would be pertinent to provide all young children across the country with laptop computers so these children could start creating electronic melodies just like those played on the site which would in time give rise to a new folk music for the country and out of this music would come new folk dances and fairy tales and all the rest. So many times in recent years I have searched across the internet for the text of this statement in case it was saved on a website somewhere but it appears to have disappeared forever.

I feel that all music at its core is always attempting to emulate the human voice. The central sound of our human existence is the sound of our name being said by our mother and to go a little further I think that our name and indeed all words that evolved out of our names are themselves an attempt to emulate the rhythm of

the heartbeat we share for a time with our mother. Beach for example is one thump of a heartbeat. Surgery is three thumps and not only is it three thumps but it is a very particular kind of heartbeat. It is a heartbeat that is attempting to skip a beat perhaps due to adrenalin or some other chemical or condition. That being understood I would encourage you to listen to any piece of music whether it be a percussive techno dance banger or a noisy rocker with walls of feedback or a gentle piano nocturne and listen to how the sound sources are attempting to mouth a word. Listen to the notes of the piano as they try to mimic lips and tongue. The guitar and drums as they do their best mimicry of consonants and vowels. Singing is obviously an easy give away but do cast your head back to the first slaps on the stretched skins of animals and imagine a name being cast into the air.

Let us recap the formula. Your name is the product of the sound of a beating heart. Music is created the moment an instrument begins to emulate the voice of your mother articulating your name the way she heard it when you were a heart beating inside of her stomach. When we listen to music the water in our brain is stimulated to ripple in shapes that form the shape of our name. Or similar.

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My wife once told me a story about a time she was alone in the bush with her sketchbook and charcoal and when I say she told me the story once I am being quite literal as she has only ever mentioned it the one time and when I made reference to it some years later she experienced an involuntary physical reaction that told me she had no intention of ever talking about it again. The story which I will share here for now but may be removed later if my wife requests for it to be taken out is that she was walking along a rusty rail line from the previous century which must have been used to transport coal through the bush back when that industry was literally shaping the area. She looked up for a reason she could not account for and saw in front of her perched on the rail line a bird of a variety that she had never before seen. The bird looked directly at my wife and made a noise that she had never before heard from a bird or any other animal or part of nature or machine for that matter. She stared at the bird wondering if she should open her sketchbook and draw it or whether this would frighten the bird away. As it turns out she had already begun to do exactly this and immediately the bird flew up above the trees and was never to be seen or heard by her again.

When I asked my wife to describe the bird to me her face instantly turned to shadow. She went to efforts to explain just how intrinsically linked the sound was that the bird made to the

appearance of the bird and that any accurate description of the bird must simultaneously share the phenomena of both its visual and audible elements. However the more she described the physical appearance of the bird the less she was able to recall how the bird sounded. And when she would start to recall the sound the bird made she would lose sight of what the bird looked like and further to this the details would corrupt and change so that a sound she was almost completely sure of when she was focused on describing what she heard of the bird would in a few seconds change into something entirely different when she attempted to then get into the details of what the bird looked like. She eventually became so exasperated at trying to recall the bird to me that she jumped up from the bed and left the room in such a rush of emotion as I had never witnessed from her before. I only tried to bring the subject up again once after this and then I realised I should probably never raise it again but there have been times when I have seen the way she turns towards the resounding of a sudden trumpet or horn as are sometimes practiced in a hall a couple of streets over from our house or even the way she looks at a particular arrangement of branches in a tree from time to time when I know she must still think about the bird she saw and heard that day on the rail in the bushland. I am sure she must hope it will one day manifest itself in front of her again. In

saying this she has not been back to that bushland for over twenty years so perhaps she is not so preoccupied with finding the bird as I assume.

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The bus pulls up on Beaumont Street right outside The Watt. This is not only one of the most historic pubs in the area but also for sure one of the most unpredictable establishments in the city. It is still to this day the only place I have ever witnessed homemade outdoor fireworks released indoors and when you ordered a steak you never quite knew if the chef was going to remember you asked for it medium rare or whether the chef was going to be tackled to the floor of the kitchen by police on an almost nightly raid of the establishment. The Watt was the first place I ever saw drugs being visibly handled and the first place I ever saw a fist fight between adults break out. Once I was walking past and a young professional looking chap in his early twenties walked out the front doors of The Watt and all of a sudden a red sedan careened down the middle of the street and slammed the breaks on beside this young chap and then whoever was in the passenger seat pulled out a rifle and pointed it right in his face. The young chap reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a huge bundle of hundred dollar notes as in there must have been around five or ten thousand

dollars there and he threw it in the window of the sedan and then it sped off down the street. It was that kind of pub.

But it was also the kind of pub that had the best bands and a really interesting mix of people from the arts students who walk down from Islington who I can see tonight such as these couple of poet dudes with their long hair and thin arms wrapped around their noise musician girlfriends with piercings all over and an absence of any underwear and then you have the big guys in from the wharf who have docked at the Carrington coal loader and they might be just in from Singapore or from China and they are of every nationality you can think of with tattoos on their forearms and their thighs and faces that to my eyes always demand to be read in combination of each other like hieroglyphics on a wall but because the sailors keep moving around they tell a story without a definite beginning or conclusion and because of this the content contained within their ink tells something utterly true about the narrative data running beneath the skin of the world and then on past these sailors you have the taxi drivers hanging around the front doors smoking and waiting for their next shift to start and while they were very rarely involved in fist fights I have seen more than a couple of them throw a glass into the pub like a hand grenade that started many of the worst brawls that they would

then stand and laugh about from the sidelines and of course it would be remiss to not mention the peculiar family friendly vibe injected by a few of the patrons as you have locals in pressed suits and married couples in groups wearing organic shirts and pants abiding that tightrope aesthetic of free thinking progressives and the mortgages they chum butter for every week day and just to wrap up the scene I would also make mention of the university students in polo shirts and thongs playing complicated board games near the music stage and the electronic slash country slash dub reggae fusion band setting up near them and the bar staff who are absolute athletes in the manner they are able to move around the bar and dive between each others legs in order to get past with a glass of bourbon and a packet of nuts and not to say anything here about the long term residents who live above the bar area who are a whole story all of themselves and while I have only been eighteen for a few months and hence have only been coming to places like this for a short while I can honestly say that sure of course absolutely it is true I have only just met this girl and am only just starting to get a read on her but I can think of no other place in the world that will make more of an impression of the kind I am trying to make in terms of a heightened sense of stimulation and fascination and why not once more call it what it is which is a certain sense of danger that can only be

forged here at the Watt Hotel.

It is one thing to be able to entertain yourself. I have invested a major portion of my life into recognising how I am best entertained and how to replicate this whenever the conditions are suitable. To commence the best sequence of lights and colours and sounds and gradients of tactile feedback that stimulate just the right sort of emotional stew to fizzle and reflect up against all the interior surfaces of my skull. Like I have mentioned before this reflection is important because for something to exist it must have a mirror double. To remember that you have a world outside of your head you must find a way to mirror it from the inside. For me this is what guides me when I sit across from a beautiful redhead nurse in training with green space flower eyes and cosplay fox ears after we order some pork belly bites and fries and whatever else we could afford on a salary of historic pinball compositions and first aid internship money. We had a beer each and clinked bottles together in cheers as I unleashed all the lights and colours and sounds and gradients of tactile feedback that I could infuse into my words as I attempted to show this beautiful girl just what a rich interior life I had and what a carnival of ideas I could blast confetti style all over the dinner table. What else could I do. Play it cool and ask her questions about her life. I only learned to do that a couple of months ago.

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That night eighteen years ago when we embraced on the beach together and I pushed my face into her breasts and listened to the chambers of her heart move a couple of dozen litres of blood around her body and she pushed her left ear against the top of my head to hear all the tiny mechanical gears spin into each other and generate just enough friction to cause the sort of warmth that gives birth to consciousness. I could not have anticipated the life to come from that moment. Earlier in the night on the bus when she asked if we were passing from the underworld to the world of the living or the other way around I now know that the answer was yes. It was both of these things and would be for every single day we lived our lives together.

Afterwards when she was lying in my arms on the declivity of a sand dune that cradled several other sand dunes in a fold of shadows that flattened out to the shoreline with her red hair strewn across my chest she looked into the sky and asked if I could hear that. I said I could hear the ocean and she said not the ocean. Can you hear the sound of the earth rubbing against space. Look up towards the curved roof of the world and listen. She said that is the Karman line. The layer of atmosphere that is technically the last piece of our earthly sky before it transitions to outer space. She

said you can hear the curvature of atmosphere pressing against the pressure of all surrounding space anytime you are surrounded by environmental silence. Can you hear that low droning tone. I said I could not. She pressed herself further into me and said that sometimes the sound causes her to feel nauseous. I meant to ask her how she knew so much about space but it turned out to be another one of those things I assumed I would ask a little later on and then never got around to.

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Leif and Katita. Not my name and not hers and yet these were the two I settled on. I had used Leif as a name many times in my writing in the past as an anagram of Life. Katita was a new one though and I can only assume at the time I was thinking about the fox ears that my wife was wearing the night before and how I must have moved from canine to feline as she certainly shared many more personality traits what with her watermelon eyes and so on which must have been how I synthesised the name Katita for my female protagonist. Looking out at the towns I passed from the inside of the train carriage on by Hexham and Tarro and Beresfield and the way the city of Newcastle gave way to the pastures and dusty platforms of these little country towns that would

become more rural with every passing stop. It is not quite accurate to say that the electric lights of the city were gradually replaced with the oil lamps and candle flames of the countryside but it certainly could be said that the full moon over Maitland was being turned up in incremental clicks of brightness and clarity that rendered it as a much more tactile piece of concrete space than I had ever been exposed to and it reminded me how in those twenty four hours since first meeting the girl who would go on to become my wife and during the twelve hours since I had last seen her I was driven as if by an invisible force to reach out and touch things with my hands in such a way that my fingers were honestly just craving any smooth line or tom ridge of the world to caress and feel and remember whether this was on earth or as was not immediately apparent to also crave the surface of anything outside the earth as well.

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After taking a shower and considering my modesty before the glass windows that buffered me from the vast desert world of Shanbudia I recall how for each of the six mornings I stood and looked out like this I was never anything less than completely awestruck by just how foreign this view was to anything I had ever seen before. Beyond the immediate motorways and apartment buildings

copy and pasted ad infinitum as simulacra of the life to come that stretched deep into the distance there was a surrounding kingdom of sand that blanketed every patch of vision otherwise void of construction. In the middle of each night I would wake and look from my balcony out to the horizon and would see small handfuls of light bleeding at positions I understood belonged to the cities of neighbouring countries. During the day it was impossible to see these distant cities as the glare from the sky had a way of smudging all details into one broad expanse of light that erased definition beyond the hotel.

I would be surprised if there had been more than one single thought in my head on that final morning when I got dressed and walked out of the apartment. The night before was definitely not in my head. That came later. The only conscious intention I had that morning was to walk in a spirit of blank minded meandering and so I walked through the hotel from the twelfth floor down to the ground and out to the driveway where palm trees formed a turning bay beside a large white sculpture that looked like a solar flare rendered in concrete. Previous mornings when I stepped out there were a dozen pale saffron taxi vehicles parked and waiting for passengers and yet this morning they are not here. Not only that but the hotel employees that usually stand out here and welcome new visitors to the hotel and farewell

those leaving are not present either. Come to think of it there was nobody in the lobby this morning either. From the pool area through the breakfast dining room and the lobby and onto the driveway the hotel was as silent as it was humid which is to say that it had as much commotion as morning traffic on the moon.

At the bottom of the hotel driveway a single road splits into what appears as a hundred different exit routes that wind into onramps and causeways. They extend across fountain soaked pikes and disappear into shopping centre car parks and other temples of synthesised nature with the most extraordinary interiors that replicate snow covered ski slopes and underwater aquariums filled with manta rays and exotic fish and even sharks that must be very well fed or at least sedated in some manner as they do not give the usual victims in the tank a second look. In less than ten hours I will be boarding my flight home. Perhaps I should walk to the airport from here. It would take at least a twenty minute hike along the main highway before you get off the strip and into any sort of neighbourhood or change of scenery. Fortunately there are no cars on the road this morning so I am not only at no risk of being knocked by speeding traffic but I am also allowed the rare freedom of walking on the highway itself. Typically this is in no way a city to be walked. At first I stick to the lane of ongoing traffic but as I

keep looking back to sight any approaching cars and see nothing but empty space I eventually move into the very middle of the highway. There is no barricade dividing the traffic traveling south from the traffic traveling north so I literally am able to walk up the middle of the highway with one foot in the lane traveling south and one foot in the lane traveling north.

I can see that around two kilometres down the road an exit ramp turns left and then swings into a bridge that crosses the highway and heads towards what appears as a miniature city from this distance and is from what I can make out one of the nearest populated areas to walk to. Certainly there are some businesses dotted along the sides of the highway such as self storage warehouses and car yards and industrial sales supplies but like the road they are all void of activity this morning and even if they were not I had no interest in surveying sites of that nature. As much as I do love the efficient anonymity of industrial business areas and the grand barcode highways that roll up to and past them like some heavy concrete tongue depressors holding down whatever antique strips of nature are saying ahh beneath them it is not this sort of experience I am seeking but rather I want the more intimately rapid navigation of laneways and stairwells in order to participate in as much antigeometry as urbanism can perform. My only real question at this distance is whether I slowly

veer left and walk onto the exit ramp proceeding to then cross the bridge and into the city or whether I can simply veer right and head up what appears as a sandy embankment that will then take me to the same position the bridge connects to. I have twenty minutes of empty highway wandering to decide on the best course of action with still no sign of any cars either in the lane of my left foot or of my right.

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As the density of red gums reduced and the woodland bush dispersed behind us I asked Les about the approaching fields. They are of a highly manicured variety not at all similar to the rough tumble of paddocks we pressed alongside to get into the bushland. Again Les appeared to have no idea what he was looking at as he grimaced and stumbled out some words like well it must be out the back of or perhaps this is where no that would be further south ah. We both spotted what looked like chicken coops and greenhouses right on the crest of the field which we agreed we should explore. While we walked there Les pointed pieces of nature out to me like a bee dancing around a tumble of lavender. He said watch the looping patterns it moves through. This is how they will teach programming languages to children in the future. Watch how the wings open

in a cascade and vibrate with a softness so foreign to our current mechanics. I said oh I reckon you could recreate those physics with an ace of spades and a rubber band and Les laughed and shook his head. He said this landscape is becoming increasingly low polygon. The warmth of the sun feels so geometric.

Les described how he wanted to start generating cryptocurrencies out the back of his yard with a few weatherproof microprocessors in plastic bags connected to wind turbines he would stick on top of stakes by the fence line. I thought that sounded like a great idea. When we squinted into the low clouds hanging above the couple of hundred metres before us we were convinced we could see streaming data pouring down from them in some sort of augmented reality sun shower. The data precipitated shapes that we were trying to decode. One of the shapes was of a battleship. Another of a nurse wielding a sword. Plates of food and visions of sunset that populated into dustings upon the fields before us. An alligator clip and a sundress to compress.

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Les and I sat on chairs that faced each other at the far end of the table. Next to Les sat a lady in her say forties or early fifties with shoulder length hair that ran from cherry blonde to fog grey

in a spectrum of light that shifted in uncertain ways within the dimness of the hall. She wore bright red lipstick and had cheeks that connected to her nose in ways that I can vividly remember but can barely describe with any accuracy the manner in which the slouched and languid trajectories of her cartilage filled me with a sense of magnetic calm that I kept returning to throughout the night.

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There is a stretch of coast up here before you get to Port Rhombus proper where the land heading inland enters a declivity of shadowed pastures that never quite seem to catch the sun. By the time high clouds pass the fields in the morning and the afternoon light descends behind crowned rock canopies the world has turned so far on its side that it is only the river system across the highway that catches any direct heat. This is where the thin rows of purple saffron flower are grown in the region. Fragile tissue paper petals reach towards where they last felt warmth from the atmosphere perhaps from a passing satellite or a rocket expiring its fuel while their stiff yellow spice rods jut out the middle and throw wide the red floral stigma ribbons that hold their position from the inside like a celebration frozen in a state of hung architecture.

On this occasion my wife says to slow down and we pull off to the side of the road and get a closer look at the flowers. Usually if we stop like this beside a field we would make sure our car windows were wound up due to spots like this being such a haven for bees so I am surprised when my wife opens her door and walks towards the field. She implores me to get out and look as well. I can see what she is referring to as I unclip my buckle. Today this field is not filled with bees. It is filled with hundreds of tiny mechanical drones.

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Through the courtyard I come across a paediatric wing of the hospital I do not remember passing through on the way here. There is a classroom and a recreation room for kids who are patients here at the hospital. It looks as though in the recreation room the nurses are putting on a dance party for a dozen children aged between say six and fourteen. The nurses have an old record player they are loading classic disco dance records onto. I recognise one of the labels on a record being put back into its sleeve as Outa Space by Billy Preston so I stop to watch through the door for a moment.

They seem to be having some trouble keeping the record spinning. The nurse puts on the record and the kids listen to it for a few bars

before really getting into it as they start wildly dancing around the room. When they start dancing however they stomp the floor so much that it shakes the record player and the needle falls off the groove of the record. The nurses start the record again and sure enough the same thing happens. When the record starts to get just the right beat going for the kids to dance to they destroy the song by dancing to it. Outa Space fails due to how groovy it is. The fact it is such a dance worthy tune ensures that it will not be able to be danced to. Perhaps there is another record that is somewhat dance worthy but not so much that everybody actually wants to move to it. Some happy middle ground. No. Come on. The record either inspires dance or it does not. If it does not inspire dance there is no point in putting it on. But if it does inspire dance then it cannot be danced to. Or maybe there is a way for these children to learn to dance in perfect synchronisation with the rotations of the record beneath the needle. If the children could dance in time with the slight fluctuations rising and falling from the vinyl then maybe they could avoid shaking the floor and knocking the record out of its groove. I picture the record going around and around in circular revolutions and the children dancing in similar geometric loops that weave together with the music to create some sort of perfect harmony.

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You never outlearn
the old mistakes of your youth.
They are your first love,
your footfalls of truth.

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I will finish by saying that I plan on taking a little trip inland shortly. Just for a few days. A couple of years ago I learned that after Les passed away his parents sold up the family property and moved far west of the state into the outback. I never really spoke to his parents after his funeral service. There are things I would like to share with them about their son that I now feel ready for in a way that I was previously not. I feel as if my inside is more fully connected to my outside if that makes any sense. Communication comes easier now. My eyes may never quite be the exploding stars of my wife or our beautiful little daughter but these days I feel like they are no longer concrete roundabouts on the outskirts of some industrial sector of the city not yet populated. Before our daughter was born my wife and I would entertain ourselves by walking around the streets here in Hamilton picking up little objects to put under a microscope on our dinner table. Now when I walk I feel like I

am rather magnifying myself. A map of my head filling up the lost streets. Maybe the poem is correct in that you never outlearn the old mistakes of your youth but in all honesty I tend to believe they were never really mistakes to begin with.

Just Talking About Pies

The way to keep
three small pies warm
for the ride home
is to buy seven and then
use the warmth of
the many to blanket
the few.

Not Dry

i - Los Dos Hombres

After setting up a short video camera tripod with a long cylinder fixed to the base the how many, the six members of the investigation team, they walk away from the cylinder as it emits a faint glow, a soft powder luminescence, flickering against the red stone pavers, the orange soft drink sunset, bubbles against the skyline, the bridge, the river and the marshland, the airport behind (how much is not enough when talking about nihilism), fizzing not so much with carbonation but, but with loading signal whir noise spin sputter, like the sound of fine silver gears spinning within the media of little angel wings hovering behind your head, your ears, loitering against the ratio, nearly there, extending, loading (if less is more than imagine how much more is).

Without the sort of time or focus required to categorically describe each of the six members of the investigation team it might be rather easier to parse between them the following characteristics: five of the six are wearing headgear of which three could be described as helmets, one as a fishing hat with a halo above and

one is a modern looking jingasa with perhaps radio equipment sewn in; clothing across the team varies wildly although a colour consistency of navy and tan stay across the shawls, the armor, the trench coats, whatever else covers them; two are children, one is a girl in her twenties with a dingo tail and pierced dingo ears with gold loops through the holes, is that too much detail, it draws the eye. I say to Les, did I ever read you the short story by Schopenhauer about the kids who receive a copy of Aesop's fables from their mum and the kids throw it back at her and say, what, you want us to believe these stories of talking animals. Grow up.

We turn to see a local lady, local to Les not to me, I am not from around here, thirties, five foot what, lime salted bob cut blonde, grey overalls, pull up against the jetty in her trawler, the capital c Collector they call her, they Les, they the local restaurant owners and who else. Always the same time of late afternoon, on a loop, with boxes full of disjecta found in the sea, mostly the bones of birds and animals that look like birds. She takes them up to her studio on the hill, we will see its lights turn on shortly through broad ocean facing windows after she carries her boxes to her salt rusted pickup and careens up the road where she will unpack and create a fossilised shadow theatre against the ceiling and the walls.

Les says how appropriate for our dining this evening. You mean sea bird on the menu, no

he means the Mexican restaurant, Los Dos Hombres with its Day of the Dead colour palette and decor, Under the Volcano but Les they don't serve alcohol here. He says that he drinks heavily these days and I say yes of course, I know, so do I. The six investigators patrol the waterfront only some ten metres from our table, scanning the ground with instruments, searching. So why a dingo says Les a little too loudly and don't say D O G as in Nietzsche's 'Death Of -' and the waitress says what can I get for you, I order the steak, chorizo and potato in pasilla sauce, Les a massive enchilada. Why not a cat and don't say C A T as in 'Comedy And -' Les gestures around him, or a B I R D and don't say 'Being Is Really -' and he gestures again.

The channel of water rolls in horrendously obtuse angles, generating creaking timestretched drone reverberations like those from falling glaciers, as a megafauna goat with hooves the size of ambulances trots down the middle of the river, stepping over the bridge now as it sloshes water onto the motorway, cars honking and turning on their windscreen wipers in defense. Pouring our drinks, the waitress leans her broad olive face towards Les and says, do you know what we call a goat with no hind legs. Gracias. She walks away ringing a bell like laugh that turns into an echo of little chimes as she puts on a stain glass cathedral headpiece that covers her face down to below her

chin. Beside the restaurant is a patch of synthetic grass that leads into a miniature golf arcade. The waitress stands on the grass with her back to the wall of the restaurant and, as a little white ball rolls between her legs, the cathedral lights up.

The thing is Les, you are a M A N you know all 'Meaninglessness and -' thirty seven years of Nihilism no need to remind me, but that woman, sure, sure, just add 'Wondering Overrides' and you have yourself a remedy. Wondering as a verb, as in I am just wondering through the city. My man you are all G O O D (see you in the 'Garden Of Ontological Divisions') but I have let our friendship linger. A recommended memory notifies me of when we were young men with friends walking beneath some dreampunk moon towards the waves, a wall of light some three kilometres up the dunes all smoke filtered streaming from a chemical plant right there on the beach, sharing the grains with us so to speak, bathing its cylinders in the salt water as - well I cannot remember whether we did the same or not.

Just like, Les says, how I cannot remember the reason for asking you down here, why you drove in the vein of the 1986 Sega arcade game Outrun, down a straight road, transitioning across ecosystems and time zones, reveling (he knows this) in a collage of colour and landscape and genre that saw me make this journey, only the second time in a decade, how sad is that. However unlike

Outrun there was no girl beside me to synchronise witness to the diamond ocean and ember sunset decline, to the synthesizer melodies bouncing down octaves, not trying to outrun police or even time for that matter but the other thing. What the investigation team is looking for, what the Collector is not coming home with.

He says that he goes into space a lot these days, that he holds onto VHS tapes of Sol Bianca and tells everybody he is not really a tourist, that he is one of them, and I say of course, I know, so do I. The beach is the most moonlike area on earth, especially of a nighttime but even without the stars, it has that edge of consciousness feel to it. Step into the ocean and drift through space, push off from the moon dust that clings to your feet as you tumble away from the ground like a cannonball in love and then, hold on, into the black hole gob of a whale who wants to show you the future, but Les remember we do not listen to animals (see: Schopenhauer, see Space Whale Aesop).

The burrito is half gone, no, completely gone, when Les says hey how have I finished already, did I even taste it, seriously where did it go. And then he says, come on why did I ask you down here, I honestly cannot remember. I suggest that he did not ask and he says come on man, you know what I mean, I was feeling down but now I feel something else. How do you feel. Well. I feel

like filtered light. How do you feel. I feel like the reason there was no girl beside me on the drive down is she is feeding our children at home. I feel like, you know how you see images these days of things that perhaps a human should not have access to. Lady bugs covered in a field of tiny dew drops that magnify their form into cellular bloom. Towering walls of salt coloured all gold and purple dripping thick gravities. Nano medical miracles blown up on billboards. High resolution psychogeographic walking tours of quiet places nobody except the unconscious locals ever visit. Bison at thirty seven below zero.

I feel like, like how do you turn those image events, that seem beyond the frame of regular human observation, into metaphors that can meaningfully connect not just two disparate concepts but two people together. How when I used to play the electronic organ in nursing homes, show tunes of the twenties and thirties and forties, how everybody sang along. Les, imagine if we get to sit in a nursing home together one day, just what songs will our compatriots sing. Just think of the subgenres and niche fragmentations of culture and song we subscribe to. What will we sing together, other than Wonderwall.

Perhaps we will just listen to waves at the beach. Not at the beach, of course. And, of course, of course, I already know the answer full well but I do not say it aloud lest the illusion be shattered, for

Les that is. But just between us it will be the same as Proust predicted when his narrator as a young man imagined what the theatre would be like, the spectators looking, quote, as through a stereoscope, at a scene that existed for himself alone, though similar to the thousand other scenes presented to the rest of the audience individually, end quote, translated. There is plein air painting happening beside the restaurant here, Les points at the painter, is he silhouetting us as we ask for the bill, is he swallowing the waitress in ink, no he is illustrating a QR code which, as darkness sets, is timeless black on black.

I want to show you something. Put this stain glass cathedral headpiece on to see, well, not necessarily through a glass, darkly, more so through one window for each eye, through an algorithmic sequence of vowel shaped filtered lights that make it all seem so bloody real Les, can you feel the meaningfulness, the real thing, this apartment in Hong Kong, the background music like the muzak we used to listen to years before, that soft nineties female whispered vocal sample percussive ride cymbal night loop that makes you feel like you were given a name by the warmth of the universe, no longer an orphan of the underworld. Look at what I am wearing on my head now, is it coming through clearly.

The apartment is stunning in a measure equal to most any fantasy of luxury emboldened by

your standard teenage capitalist raised on the sort of love lessons gained on the bow of space opera observation decks, of two in the morning airport shopping districts as you wait to fly in the opposite direction of wherever. Broad ocean facing windows, whales in the distance sure, but what about the birds Les, who dreamt them up, was it you, was it the Collector, gulls flying through the open doors, to the inside and to the out, like one of those menageries built into grand manor homes where peacocks walk from the dining room through to the garden alcove to drink from the fountains. Lo the birds do not smell, they do not defecate or leave feathers behind, rather they are splinters of light, weightless, shards of betwixt magnesium correcting the environment yes as fine white cursors blinking across, deleting for mercy, the simulated skyline.

When the rain comes it brings with it a trolley problem. Do I let it rain on your headset and cause you to worry about the impact on the electronics (the shock of the real) or do I take the risk you will not notice and just allow the simulated wetness to embrace us (the virtual real). How would it be to just recline here as the water rises around us, the street lights warbling amniotic shine flutter through bleeding darkness, bubbles against the eye line, wow talk about real, Les. Perhaps we just need to get more sleep and drink more water, it could be that the antidote to

philosophy is interoception. Say you were to take the lit cathedral away from your head and notice you were yet wearing another cathedral, that beyond this level of simulation you were being stimulated by ever more fiction - what then. Have I just given the punchline away. Is it ok to laugh now. The thing about nihilism is that it helps us to believe in everything (the cylinder is an embryo).

ii - Marigold and Butterfly

We are following, somewhat, the topographical path observed, loosely, in a Brett Whitley painting. It has brought us here to this little town that I know like the inside of a calculator resting in the palm of my hand which is to say only somewhat, loosely (make sure to replace the round plastic backing of the calculator lest the numbers slip onto the ground of the little town and turn upside down). This will be the first evening of the trip that I will, verily, leave my wife in the hotel room while I head out for dinner, as who knew that one of my mates had moved here for cryptoagricultural work. He has a table reserved in a Thai restaurant. See you later tonight, I call out to my wife who is busy sitting cross legged on the smooth white bed covers of our, to my mind, Chinese decored room, illuminating the gold lamp shade, the gold and

burgundy sash across the foot of the bed (red and gold sunset was, for Whistler, a landscape mirror for the slides of blood he had observed beneath microscope in the seaside maternity hospital of his autumn years), with the glow cast from the holographic sculpture she is curating with a platform of light emitting diodes and penny tealight candles at her feet.

Against the windows of the restaurant a light rain is gradually raising its dynamics. The food is wonderful and we are efficient with ordering and consuming. We talk all things crypto - cryptoagriculture on the blocksupplychain, cryptopastoralism rewriting the history of sun smudged wheat fields and the religions they harvest, cryptocurrencies which are nowhere near abstract enough for us, we wish they did not translate to real money at all (it is the concept we want to invest in, we want to become conceptually rich). After eating we head out into the rain which is now in full symphony, cryptorain perhaps in torrents, and my mate he says I know a bar the next block up, so we strafe puddles beneath us and awnings above until we get to the bar and of course, the pandemic, they have already met their quota for the night. The girl on the desk looks at us as if to say, how could you not have known, and how about not asking me if any other bar will have occupancy because I have enough to worry about here, while you want a clean well lighted place to

have a drink we are just trying to survive. So we say no problem and head back onto the street where, between the darkness and the rain, visibility is in low supply.

We try another bar but we are both so utterly drenched, so heavy with water, our shirt pockets billowing with raindrops, that we cannot be sure if we are turned away because of our flood aesthetics or because this inn too is full. Time to wrap up the night, my mate hails a taxi and when the driver peels the window down a crack he yells at my mate, you better have a towel, to which my mate replies, you know we are like sixty percent water, and the taxi driver says yeah on the inside fella, come on, and I wave and head back to the hotel. I drip in the foyer, I drip in the hallways like I am twelve again and returning from the pool with squelchy rubber thongs on my feet and an itchy towel that will not hold up around my waist, and then knock knock my key is too wet to work so my wife opens the door and I let my heavy clothing slap on the floor until I am in the warm shower and then in a dressing gown on the edge of the bed.

My wife with her antique heartwood bangs squirreled into a patch of gingham, coke bottle lenses (loupes, microscopes) pushed right up to the light wireframe lines of neon cast from the arrangement of LEDs and tealights networked across the bedspread, the outline of a marigold

from the stem up through the leaves to its immense floral head, and with its legs ingested in the glow of the petals a butterfly with its head bent south, within reach of being able to sip nectar from one of the moist florets, quote within reach unquote the critical term here as it is intentionally ambiguous as to whether anything is actually happening between the marigold and the butterfly. Ontologically speaking. After all, the seeds of the marigold are redacted and the butterfly can offer it nothing in terms of conveyance. This is not untoward code, this is literally the foundation of their nature, as observed. And yet they dance. To be sure, on a structural level, her architecturally shifting light pillars, yes say geodesic polygons lowing, no doubt they move now into bends, the lines subtracted into each other, replacing the overlapping waves with negative space and, of course of course, they bend into the shape of vowels and expire into hyperventilated panting.

There are what they call dead malls, empty shopping centres no longer frequented with money, that, my wife says, you, that is me, fetishise. And there are shopping centres built across satellite districts in China that are never intended for use, their economic function is solely in their construction. So, she says, to the west you have expansive tiled amphitheater voids that have lived and died, and to the east you have ones that

have been born but cannot come to life. Which one, sweetheart, most resembles your soul. If only, she says, I knew the genealogy of your infatuation with lonely places. Yes, your parents cleaned empty libraries, after hours tourism depots, midnight council buildings all echo and cathode ray tube screensaver laden, distant train lights behind the carpark tundra, but is this really the reason you love me.

We stare up at the ceiling, at a field of starlight residue cast up there against the pressed metal by the fading LEDs now sprinkled across the carpet, haphazard like the distribution of seeds in a country garden. The tealights are extinguished and sit smoldering faint gray plumes like those that might rise from the chimneys of toy houses that little well dressed bears and mice turn into toy homes. My wife says say cosmism but time stretch the consonants. She says that is the sound the universe will make when our minds reach peak intelligence and in a moment of revelation will set fire to the universe. You do not believe me, her words, staring roofward, our bodies parallel landscapes of milk and dynamite, I cough and she says, put yourself in the ethical shoes of Nikolai Fedorov, his vision of salvation where nobody would miss out on enjoying the results of future societal progress because death would be unimagined. Those who fought and labored for the fruits of other generations to receive, they would

not need die, because you see technological innovations, say cryptocollection, The Collector, will gather all the matter of deceased humans together to reform them, piece by piece. Look at the stars. Do you see Evald Llyenkov up there, now we live in a post death world, he says that through communism we will continue to evolve and flourish and develop to peak intelligence, I am repeating myself so you know the punchline, how in this post death world we will reach maximum consciousness and in a moment of cognitive bliss all matter in existence will be spontaneously set ablaze, causing the second Big Bang, resetting all creation so we can begin (be bang) again.

The bedhead has a radio built into it. We listen to Japanese city pop, the same genre of tunes that Les and I listened to in the simulated Hong Kong apartment, those eighties pop gems from Japan that recreated the sounds of the Western seventies that had been pouring out of America. But we enjoy the facsimile versions so much more, not only because we cannot understand what the Japanese artists are singing, but because of the gap, the spatial delay, that this copied aesthetic presents. It is not just that the copy is inherently better, most often the songs are technically identical, although the Japanese tunes do have more synthesizers which is really cool, but you see it is rather that the distance between the copy and the original gives us the space we need to really

allow ourselves to fall into it wholesale, to submit to this sudden dream without forensic criticism, to lose ourselves in photocopied melodies like, well perhaps a little like Warhol, but more like a filter on a photograph of a landscape that improves its colours to a condition of inebriated simulacrum that nature could only aspire to. Sensory drunk on having been transported to a parallel version of your own history that feels more vivid in present retrospect than your own banal memories of the lived same. Kind of like how you fall in love with the image rather than the person, the empty shopping centre instead of the vacant head, the poem removed from its homeland, the analogy no longer with any family alive in these parts or, from what well versed authorities can ascertain, any other.

Minutes from sleep we open the Internet Archive and look for a free text copy of our biographies to read. There are five million plus biographies on the site and we find our own separate life stories fairly quickly but it takes a little longer to track down a version of what might be our joined history. Each time we think we find our story, there is something in it, a detail, that casts us with a perspective that is not quite us, or at least it does not seem to be us. I turn to look at the face of my wife as she scans the screen, the wavelength of her cartilage, the country garden dice roll of her freckles, arcade machine blue glow

eye tutti between vanilla sclera refreshing, exchanging pixels with the monitor, and again with reference to Proust it was like how he saw the three steeples of Martinville and Vieuxvicq from the carriage, how they shifted into new ontological states depending on the perspective he was able to access at the time, so too as my wife turns her face I think, that is not her, that is not her, that is not her, ah yes that is her, there she is, revealed to be herself at a seventy three degree angle obtuse from the pillow. Turn the page and what about this one, that is not us, that is not us, that is not us, oh wait it is us to a tea.

I see a book on the site that I read many years before, C.G. Jung and Hermann Hesse: A Book of Two Friendships, by Miguel Serrano. When I was a teenager twenty five years earlier running high on Germany philosophy I relished reading the warm conversations that Serrano, who had traveled all the way from Chile to wander through the rural outlays of Europe in search of these two men, had with these founts of insight into consciousness and spirituality and the impact of world war on what it was to be human in those days. They discussed archetypes, art, arbor metamorphosis and so on, all the things a fifteen year old craves to know about to help navigate nineteen nineties suburban life. Well imagine my surprise when I read an updated biography on the Internet Archive that describes this seemingly

balanced man, Miguel Serrano, this diplomat and yoga enthusiast who delivered these gentle conversations with our twilight luminaries on the lessons of radical kindness we can take from boys who turn into trees, how he, Serrano, on this very same trip to meet Jung and Hesse, was already deep in the vaults of Esoteric Hitlerism. So the website states he believed that the Aryan race was descended from extraterrestrials, he believed that Hitler had escaped Germany to live under the polar ice of Antarctica, possibly in dialogue with other Nazis who were living in the centre of our hollow earth, this was all in nineteen fifty one apparently, only a decade before Jung and Hesse would both be deceased. I lay back and look at the ceiling full of formerly deceased Communist souls being reconnected and brought back to life for celestial revelation. Wagner had Parsifal say that a wound can only be healed by the sword that made it, and maybe this is why it was so easy for a man who seemed devoted, through his recorded conversations, to the freedom and dignity of all humans, to also believe in the most bizarre and abhorrent ideas possible, because polar opposites are more intimately connected then disparate notions without any charge.

The next morning I wake early and see that my wife is still sleeping. Hungry, I walk to the rooftop of the hotel in order to scan the horizon for sources of food only to realise that there is, hooray,

an edible garden right here on the rooftop. Of all the luck. I start with some Tuscan Baby Leaf Kale, then Oregano Cleopatra, some Boxwood Basil and Cha Cha Chives, Seychelles Beans, and then I taste something crunchy, dry, cereal like in texture it is, of course, part of the sandstone facade necklacing the garden. I scrape my teeth against the coarse surface and allow the detached particles to dance on my tongue before running down the back of my throat. They are like tiny seeds, similar to those found in tropical orchids. Luckily I have always enjoyed many calcium rich products across my thirty seven years so my teeth are diamond strong. After I finish the sandstone wall I move onto the roofing tiles that crunch like crispbread, then down into the ceiling of the hotel where I eat the air conditioning tubing, the electrical wires, the dust, swallowing as I walk to the wall and eat through the plasterboard, the bricks, the glass windows that crackle in my mouth like pop rocks, down through floors twenty to sixteen, I drink the pool water and eat the towels and diving board on floor fifteen, then proceed down through the subsequent floors until it is my wife who is awake and standing above me, my plump body spread out on the footpath outside with a heaving stomach, sure earlier I was quote hungry unquote but not necessarily quote eat a whole hotel hungry unquote. Well, my wife leans down and speaks into my eyes, she says, at least it was mostly hollow.

iii - Dephlogisticated Air

It may storm or it may be a rather sunny day, at this stage it is a toss up. I head for a swim at the Bogey Hole, a sea bath constructed by convicts in the early colonial years of the city. When I arrive there are a half dozen young men and women standing on the steps that lead down its hillside, watching as the ocean heaves mountainous waves over the expanse of the hole. The Welsh poet Thomas Harri Jones drowned here under similar conditions in the sixties. I head down, stubbornly, to check out the conditions for myself and consider that the waves have significantly lessened by the time I am at the edge of the pool, however not thirty seconds after I dive in I look to the ocean and see a twenty foot wave making its ascent, shadowing the Bogey Hole and the hillside. No time to get out, I dive beneath the eruption of foam and grab onto two metal bars cast down beneath the hillside steps. The receding extraction of water pulls at me beneath the waves with severe force, as if some great aquatic vacuum cleaner is suctioning out all the foreign matter from the area to deposit far out in the depths of international waters. As the sea finishes taking back what it has given I breach and climb out and say to the concerned onlookers, well that is enough adventure for one day.

Still eager for a swim I walk around the edge of a public garden and onto a walkway that leads to the public city baths. There are some two dozen heads bobbing on the water, most of them wearing colourful swim caps, looking like candied fruits floating in a bowl of cyan punch. I am not a strong swimmer and this is my first time at the baths, so I walk out slowly from the ramp that slopes into the water, foot after tentative foot, waiting to see if the sandy bottom should give way to some bottomless trench at any moment. All the while I am walking I keep thinking how much I hope that I am able to walk the whole way across the baths because of how enjoyable it would be to just languidly stroll the length of the pool, first slowly one way, and then slowly the other, and then slowly back again, slowly. I want to live in slow motion, to live my best slow life. And then what do you know, this is exactly what happened. I made it all the way to the edge, some fifty metres from where I began on the ramp, now holding onto the wall that separates the baths from the ocean. Like they were at the Bogey Hole, the waves here are steep and pour over the edge of the wall, although granted have nothing of the ferocity from earlier. The water foams over and shakes the surface tension of the baths here at the edge but it all soon dissipates and returns to ease. After scanning the area for swimmers doing laps and realising that I am in a nonintrusive position, I lay back and take a deep breath and begin to float.

Intentionally, there is almost nothing on my mind. Well. What I am thinking about, the one alternative to nothing, while I float, is a video I saw earlier that morning. It is of a young lady in Myanmar, in an area near the parliament building, performing an aerobics routine in front of a camera on a tripod. She wears a neon green top, black tights and a medical pandemic mask. The song she dances to is a high energy electronic tune, lots of vocoder (how to recognise speech, how to wreck a nice beach) and distorted bass. And then, at nineteen seconds in, without her displaying any noticeable recognition to disrupt her dancing, a procession of black armored military vehicles stream in behind her, driving up to the parliamentary security checkpoint, and then on through the checkpoint. Some of the vehicles have police lights flashing, others have what look like mounted guns sticking out of their roofs. What we are observing here is the beginning of the military coup in Myanmar on the first of February two thousand and twenty one. Party leaders were taken away and members of parliament were placed under house arrest. On the website that I viewed the video on, the headline was: Dance Dance Revolution.

This is what I am thinking about, while I float in the baths this morning. Dance Dance Revolution is a video game from nineties Japan that asks the player to perform dance steps in

accordance with colourful neon arrows that float up the screen. The fact that video of an aerobics dance routine filmed in front of a government overthrow exists in the same reality that the video game Dance Dance Revolution exists for a website headline to create a joke connecting the two is enough to short circuit my head. The event and the joke feel not only made for each other but mutually reliant on each other, as if the event did not chronologically come before the joke or the other way around, but the existence of the aerobics routine and the video game in relation to the joke headline were all given life in a moment of contingent revelation. It makes me question whether the video is even real, or was it perhaps staged just for this headline. Is this a marketing ploy by the makers of Dance Dance Revolution to reboot the series. Meanwhile, a nineteen year old girl, Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, was shot as part of civilian protests, and died as she turned twenty. Enormous posters showing the moment she was shot have been hung from bridges by fellow protesters in Myanmar. Where does this young girl fit into the mess of spectacle and political violence, of uncanny video and tragicomic headlines, of economics and meaning, of international response and meaning, of her being described as a grocery store clerk and being able to view photos of her funeral on the same social media networks that facilitated genocide in the

country only a couple years prior and meaning, of something and meaning, anything, come on.

I continue to float. The ocean waves keep pushing up and over the boundary of the baths. I wonder if any fish ever get in here. For a moment I try reaching my arms back behind my head so I am sleek like a fish, and I marvel at how much more air I am able to get into my lungs this way. How have I never tried this before. Lately I have felt like I have not been getting enough air when I breath, but now my lungs are rejoicing in oxygen. Floating in this posture I begin to sink a little, only slightly. My face gently dips under the water but I can still breath fine. The water laps over my eyes. There is nothing beneath me, nothing above me, just air filling my lungs that makes me feel lighter, emptier, with every breath.

Ember Rim

There is eighty to ninety percent flat
black expanse between the pin prick
glisten of the white and gold dot city
behind the beach with an ember rim,
why does it shine so, no necklace of
lights or fire stake phosphorescence
along the coastline, only lapping void
and then I get it, the wing of the plane,
its edge has caught some light of day
inverted, a morning turning in reverse,
not sand but aero alloy - waving hello.

Craig lives in Hamilton, New South Wales with his wife, daughter and son. He is a school teacher and is the author of the novel 'A Complicated Surgery Will Take Place On The Beach Tonight' (2020), the filmed essay 'Beyond Correct and Incorrect Nature' (2021), the novella 'Antinomicity' (2022) and the collection of short works 'Postseasonal' (2023). His poem 'Autoincorrect' (2023) was shortlisted for the Newcastle Poetry Prize, and an academic work 'A Spectrum of Real' was published by Routledge in 'Gaming Disability' (2022).

He also records music under the name Wrenasmir, releasing LP albums Disjecta Songjiang '11 - '15 (2016), Oct Mod Var (2020), Aubadion (2021), Partimentodays (2021) and Telegraph (2023). Selected tracks have also appeared on compilation albums for the German record label 'Bathurst'.

A selection of prose, poetry and plays from Newcastle-based author Craig Warren Smith. These pages offer a unique reading of internal and external landscapes, where panoramas of city and field interface with new relationships between human subjectivity and the technologies that unconceal our world. This is language as sense data, psychogeography and sweet nothing. The works in this volume were written between 2020 and 2025, including excerpts from novels and previously unpublished texts.

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